

Consort Of The Heretic

by Zmori

Category: Halo

Genre: Humor, Sci-Fi

Language: English

Characters: Arbiter, Gravemind, Prophet of Truth, Rtas

'Vadumee

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2013-02-23 03:26:45

Updated: 2016-03-17 19:16:42

Packaged: 2016-04-27 04:04:23

Rating: T

Chapters: 23

Words: 132,586

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: You've all played the game. But there are still many questions left unanswered. What's the story when the camera turns even the slightest angle away and conceals an entire story; an entire adventure hidden behind the scenes? What data is erased to ensure that this story is untold? What secrets are hidden in the Halo legend? Care to find out?

1. Introduction

****If you already understand the Halo plot, by all means, continue to Log 01. This is to ensure that everyone is caught up, and who knows? You may learn something that you didn't know. If you're still trying to learn the story line, please, play the game first. This story runs rigorously with the actual Halo plot and it is important that the readers understand exactly what is going on.****

****Thank you for your time and understanding.****

Introduction To Halo

Halo was first released by Bungie Studios on November 15th, 2001.

The game is set in the future, but the story tells that there was a species before humans called the Forerunners. They were a great and intelligent race with technology far more advanced than any human species had yet to imagine.

Alongside the Forerunners, there were the Ancient Humans. Experiments run by the Forerunners were progressed on the Ancient Human's pets, the Pherus. One of these experiments went terribly wrong and created a parasite; the Flood. The parasite sought to feed off of living hosts, contaminating their bodies and turning them into abominations. The Flood infected the grand cities of the Forerunners and the other

Ancient Races, creating an all-out war for survival.

The Forerunners knew that death was imminent, and so they built a powerful weapon — a weapon powerful enough to destroy and rid their entire galaxy of the Flood's food. This included all sentient life. This weapon was called Halo, a massive ring-like structure the size of planets. There were twelve Halos constructed.

The Forerunners made sure to save as many of the different kinds of Ancient species as possible, collecting their DNA and protecting them in tubes. They programmed their monumental machines so that after the Halo rings were launched into pinpointed locations throughout the star systems, the weapons would be activated and everything that breathed and grew would be destroyed. The Halo rings were activated by the Didact, and the galaxy was wiped clean of all life.

After waiting hundreds of years, the Forerunner machines reactivated and set to work. DNA sample after DNA sample, species of old were regenerated and distributed throughout the star systems. Humans arose from one of these samples.

The new humans grew and evolved through war and bloodshed. They rebuilt only to destroy each other again.

In the 2500s, humans had begun to explore the uncharted systems of space, constantly questioning the unknown. The UNSC (United Nations Space Command) directed missions and led the humans to further evolution.

Secret experimentations were run on young children taken from their homes. These children were raised, trained, and built to be the perfect soldiers; to become the special forces of the UNSC. Under the direction of Dr. Halsey, these children grew into trained war machines: the Spartans.

After establishing bases and colonies in outer space, the humans met an intelligent alien theocracy called the Covenant in the year 2525. The 9th Age of Reclamation began when the Covenant attacked the humans, and when they did, the UNSC was ready. The Spartans proved a large asset in the wars, and saved the human race from extinction.

In the first Halo game, you play as Master Chief, Petty Officer John 117, Chief of the Spartans, the favorite of Dr. Halsey. Master Chief is sent on a mission to destroy the recently discovered Halo ring, where the Covenant lurks to activate the old weapon. The Covenant is oblivious to the fact that the ring has the power to destroy all living things in the galaxy.

The Covenant worship the Forerunners as their gods, and in their eyes, the Halo rings were holy and sacred. The Covenant is led by an alien race called the San 'Shyuum, and their three leaders include the Prophet of Mercy, the Prophet of Regret, and the main hierarchy, the Prophet of Truth. Under the Prophets, the other races follow; the smaller Unggoy (Humans call them Grunts), the powerful Jiralhanae (Brutes), the loyal Sangheili (Elites), the great Mgalekgolo (Hunters), the swift Kig-Yar (Jackals), and the nimble Yanme'e (Drones).

On the Halo, an ancient enemy rises. The Flood attacked both Covenant

and UNSC forces alike. Master Chief destroys the Halo ring after fighting through mobs of Flood and Covenant.

The destruction of the Halo ring greatly upset the Covenant.

Master Chief is named the "Demon" by the Covenant after he destroys Halo, and the Supreme Commander who was responsible for protecting and activating the sacred ring was punished severely.

In Halo 2 (Released on November 9th, 2004), Thel 'Vadamee is brought before the High Council (A decision making body consisting of 200 Sangheili and San 'Shyuum of the Covenant) and the Prophets to receive his punishment. He is stripped of his gold armor and rank before the public of the entire Covenant. He is tortured and burned, branded with the Mark of Shame, and he is considered a heretic to his people.

Although forever scarred, the Prophets still give him a chance to regain his honor.

When the Covenant is in desperate need, they will don a Sangheili with an ancient armor and will allow him to lead his brethren into battle. Such a rank and title is the Arbiter. The Arbiter is already told that he will die, like all the others before him.

Thel accepts the armor and is given a second chance to make things right.

But by the end of Halo 2, after completing multiple vital and very dangerous missions, the Arbiter realizes that his religion and everything that he was fighting for was corrupt. The Prophets had lied to him in saying that he was saving many lives by stopping the Demon.

Master Chief explains to him how the Halo ring was actually a weapon to rid their entire galaxy of life.

The Arbiter sees truth in Master Chief's words when the Prophets attempt to assassinate him numerous times. The Arbiter, along with most of the Sangheili, secede from the Covenant and join Master Chief on his mission to keep the rings out of the Covenant's hands in Halo 3 (Released on September 25th, 2007).

At the end of Halo 3, the Prophet of Truth is stopped and killed by the Arbiter. The Sangheili create an alliance with the humans, and a truce is held between the Covenant and the UNSC. The Arbiter and the other Sangheili return to their home planet, Sanghelios. In escaping from danger, Master Chief and his AI, Cortana, are separated and lost in space.

Master Chief is believed to be dead, and his file reads "Missing in Action". In Halo 4, (Released on November 6th, 2012 by 343 Industries after buying Halo) 4 years later, Master Chief and Cortana unlock the mysteries of the ancient Forerunners, the history of the Flood, and the warrior Prometheans on their mission to get Cortana home for repairs.

****Author's Note****

Hello! Zmori here.

I'd like to give you a quick heads up on how to read this fan-made series.

As you read through the story, you may note that numbers in parenthesis follow certain phrases or words. If you scroll to the very bottom of the chapter, the corresponding number will be there and will explain the unknown phrase or term for you. These facts are story or background created by Bungie or 343 Industries, NOT by us.

The asterisks, however, are facts or story created by Cyber and I, also facts provided at the bottom of the chapters. (We will rarely use these.)

Please note, I wrote FAN-MADE series. Halo is Â©Bungie and 343 Industries, along with their characters and their story. All other characters and story are created by Cyber and I. We hope to later create a digital comic / animated series. Keep your eyes peeled.

Thank you for your time, and enjoy this ridiculous story inspired after playing a Halo 2 Co-Op Campaign.

~Z

2. Log 01

CONSORT

of the

HERETIC

Created By Cyber and Zmori

Written by Zmori

/Access Data Logs

19 October, Year 2552

Covenant Holy City, High Charity

21:37 Hours

CONNECTING...

LOG 01

Even with the air filters on full blast, it was suffocating in the observation deck. The soft hum of the engines and the steady revolution of the stars across the endless space were the only indications that time was still weaving its complex threads of Fate.

Far down below High Charity, shrouded behind the enormous mass of the grand Covenant fleet, were the remnants of the Halo. The structure was rightly named so for its former shape. However, with its

destruction, its metal was twisted and blazing with red fire. The Halo was now in ruins, its debris glistening silver in space, reflecting the light of a far off star. The edges of what could be recognized of the construct were mangled and spilling over with sharp poles, sheered devices, entire blackened flora, all encased in a steadily growing flame.

The Prophet of Truth had intended to purify this universe with this device, as was the will of the Forerunners. He would have been known as a great leader, his name written among the Covenant legends after he rid the galaxies of the Flood and the human race who dare try to put a halt to the Great Journey (**1**). All of that was lost now, all because of a failure on a Sangheili's part. Perhaps not lost, but... the unexpected occurrence certainly put the Great Journey to a halt.

The Prophet pondered this in his chair, the tips of his fingers pressed together before his chin. His large milky eyes blinked lazily as he gazed thoughtfully out the large glass that opened up the entire front side of the observatory. The tiny debris that glistened and sparkled like artificial stars were scattered before the window, steadily spinning, blinking white light on and off.

A button on the arm of his chair clicked and beeped softly, its purple light irritating his peripheral vision. He exhaled heavily through his thin nostrils and slowly lifted his arm.

"Yes?" He asked, his tone heavy with irritation.

"I bring news from the Council, noble Prophet." A deep voice rumbled through the speakers installed in his levitating chair.

"Come." He rested his forearm as the doors in the back of the room clicked loudly behind him. There were heavy footsteps on the refined metal, the honor guard's armor clacking as he walked forward.

The sangheili fell to one knee, bringing a fist to his chest in salutation. "Holy One, the Council has called for another trial."

The Prophet of Truth sighed softly. "This is the second trial in a month. The Council cannot call upon me for every little matter that arises. I have more pressing matters to attend to, Honor Guard; Fleets to command... planets to save... the Covenant to lead... a Journey to take..."

The Honor Guard bowed his head. "Of course, Hierarch. But an individual has decided to stand for the heretic."

The Prophet closed his eyes and inhaled sharply. The honor guard remained still and silent. He seemed as if he could be a statue, loyal and submissive, yet intimidating in his pose; his black and gold armor dignifying his rank as the guard of the Prophets.

"List the charges." The Prophet said wearily.

"Injury of three Jiralhanae, murder of two honor guard, (He said this scathingly), and attempt to halt the punishment of Thel 'Vadamee."

"...Why does this matter require my consent?" The Prophet inquired with a quivering arch of his brow.

"She is a female, Holy One." The honor guard spoke softly, bowing his head slightly lower in embarrassment.

The Prophet turned around slowly, his chair humming as he stared intently at the top of the honor guard's helmet. "A female Sangheili? Here? How? I was led to believe they were all on Sanghelios, protecting the planet. They are not even permitted to war." He said, his brows furrowing together in confusion on his wrinkled forehead.

"The Council is lost to the unknown, Noble One. They require your consent and careful guidance on the matter."

The Prophet brought his six finger tips together over his rounded belly, draping his dark red robes around his thin arms. His bristled chin twitched as his dangling spore-like sacs swayed with the slightest turn of his sagging neck. His chair slowly rotated back toward the open window.

"Return to the Council, honor guard. I will conduct the trial this week. Tomorrow. 1400 hours. Ensure that the Council is prepared. Alert the holy Prophets of Regret and Mercy."

The honor guard lifted his head. "So soon, Holy One?"

"Yes. I have a plan in mind. You are reprieved, 'Rolamee." The Prophet waved his hand dismissively.

The honor guard bowed his head as he stood, removing his fist from his hearts and placing it to his side. His armor began to clank against the metal floor faintly as he began to walk away.

"'Rolamee." The Prophet called without taking his gaze away from the thousands of stars stretched out before him like meaningless explosions in an endless abyss. The honor guard halted and turned his head.

"Yes, Holy Hierarch?"

"You said that the Sangheili were killed while the Jiralhanae were only injured?"

The honor guard blinked his golden eyes, flaring his mandibles, "Noble One, the Sangheili had sacrificed-"

"If the Sangheili cannot uphold their responsibilities and expectations, perhaps a change of rank is in order. Prove to me that the honor guard can protect the Covenant, and perhaps I can reconsider."

The honor guard stood silent for a while, this time, a statue of resentment and frustration. "Yes... Holy One..."

As the doors hissed and slid into the walls, the honor guard's footsteps fading down the hallways, the suffocating silence endured in the room, and the Prophet of Truth was alone with his thoughts. A

great fire suddenly exploded on the outer rim of the Halo, sending more debris flying into the blackness of space, causing more light to reflect off of the metallic mess before the window. Due to the crumbling of the Halo's atmosphere, the fire quickly reduced itself to embers along the edge, sending flames licking up into the already charred lands; perhaps to turn everything to dust.

Glorious.

****Author's Notes****

1) The Great Journey refers to the Covenant's mission to "purify the universe"; a mission, according to religion, assigned to them by the Forerunners.

3. Log 02

CONSORT

of the

HERETIC

A Fanmade Halo series

Created By Cyber and Zmori

Written by Zmori

/Access Data Logs

20 October, Year 2552

Covenant Holy City, High Charity

13:40 Hours

CONNECTING...

LOG 02

Sor 'Rolamee thundered down the hallway. Anger rippled in his wake. Not only were the Jiralhanae late with the convict, keeping the Council and the Prophets waiting, but he was particularly frustrated with this female for causing him so much trouble.

He pounded his fist on the door. He could have just called in, but his impatience was overriding his need for manners and formality.

"Open up!" He shouted. The doors hissed and clacked as they parted to make way for him. He despised the prisons. They smelled of Jiralhanae piss and Fates know what else.

Sor wound his way down a hallway arranged with honor guard. Sor had to wrinkle his nose. He thanked the Forerunners that he was not assigned here.

The prison hallway was designed so that it was difficult for prisoners to find their way out. There rarely ever were prisoners inside the cells. They were either killed or released after their trial. Sor would have preferred to have called it a very unpleasant waiting room rather than a prison.

Each cell had a panel and two guards next to its two ton door. It was extremely dull here. Sor admired these guards' patience.

After a time-wasting walk through the prisons, he finally stormed up to cell B-77.

"Open it!" He snarled as he approached the guards. A few swift flickers of the panel next to the guard on the right, an unnecessary bit of beeping and lighting, the twisting of a key from the guard on the left, and the heavy door hissed, opening into a room rank with Jiralhanae.

Sor didn't have to change his pace at all. He shoved past the guards and glared at the two Jiralhanae. "Why are you late?! The High Council and the Prophets are being kept, and you are standing around doing nothing!" The Sangheili raged.

One of the Jiralhanae snorted, "She will not wake." He motioned toward the containment room. Each cell was divided into a command room and a containment room. Their purposes were obvious, and were divided by a wall of shimmering blue plasma.

Sor growled, "Perhaps I should chain you instead and take you to the Prophets so that they can punish you for your overwhelming stupidity!" He snatched a drinking bucket away from the other Jiralhanae, his water freshly filled with ice. The Jiralhanae snorted in protest but was silenced by the glare that Sor gave him.

The plasma wall shrank back at the presence of an honor guard's armor. Sor came forth and dumped the ice water on the Sangheili laying on the floor with her back facing him.

She gasped and sat up instantaneously. She coughed and shivered, her palms to the cold metal and her back bent.

"Get up!" Sor snarled. "You are late, female!" Sor had no respect for this woman, and did not hesitate to grab her around the neck and heave her up. "Stand!" She was the reason the Prophets were beginning to doubt the Sangheili. Not only were his own men killed by this female, but this made two heretics from the Sangheili race. And now, she dares to shame him again and make him late. Unacceptable.

The female stood straight, still shivering from the cold. Sor couldn't remember the last time he had seen a Sangheili of the opposite sex, but he didn't remember them being this tall. She was almost his own height, and he was a towering 7'6 ft; an average height for a male Sangheili. She turned around.

By the Rings.

Sor froze in place; an unnatural and very uncomfortable feeling for a battle-bred Sangheili. Maybe it was just because he hadn't been around females in a long time, but all he knew was that this female in particular was beautiful.

This was perhaps one of the only beings he can despise, despite the Jiralhanae, and she had to be mandible-flaring gorgeous.

Her skin was a curious gray-tone blue. (He had never seen any Sangheili with such coloration before.) She had long, slender legs and a slim, yet finely toned body. Her eyes were the most alien part to him. They were such a startling, bright blue color that they would be hard to miss even in a massive crowd. Soft hints of purple around the iris made her gaze all the more enchanting, even as she shivered uncontrollably. Sky blue freckles were flecked beside her eyes, faintly across her muzzle, down her shoulders, around her lower waist, hips, and were more densely gathered around her lower legs. Her top jaws curved underneath her muzzle, and her lower jaws were more narrowly clenched beneath them.

It was only then that Sor realized her body was bare and he was staring. Why was she nude? How long had he been standing there? His eyes narrowed in irritation and parted his four-way jaw. "Hurry." He growled to the door.

The female glared stonily cold back at him. She was not shy or submissive like most females he knew. The females he knew of were, on average, around 6 - 7 ft tall, and their skin was much darker. Their eyes never got as bright as this one's, and served only a purpose to reproduce; to train and take care of their young, and to protect Sanghelios.

Females could be very frightening, but they never show dominance over a male. It was the male's job to maintain and lead the family and go to war.

This Sangheili here was threatening. Sor was only 78 years old- an average age for any Sangheili at war. He couldn't have been gone from home that long.

This female kept her head high, fists clenched at her sides, and stood straight. Sor waited for the Jiralhanae at the door.

After about ten seconds, he pounded his fist on the wall. "What is taking so long?!" he roared.

The two Jiralhanae came through the wall, one carrying her clothes, the other holding a silver ring. The Jiralhanae in blue armor tossed the clothes to her, if they should be considered clothes at all. The female made a face as she held the wrappings out in front of her. She looked acidly at Sor.

He shrugged his shoulders, folded his arms across his massive chest, and rested his back against the hard wall. All three of them waited expectantly. The female exhaled sharply and turned around, bending over to pull the wrappings over her legs.

Damn.

"Nice view." He said, clicking his mandibles together in a smile.

"Enjoy it while you can." The female mumbled, standing upright to pull the wrappings over her hips.

His attempt to make her feel uncomfortable had failed and she knew it. Uncomfortable comments must be a familiar thing to her. No doubt this would not be the last. A single female in a city of thousands of males who haven't seen home, much less, a female, since the beginning of the war?

Yes. No doubt.

What was she thinking; coming here? What was so important that she had to leave the safety of her home planet and risk her life in this war zone? Sor's expression was heavy with thought.

"I thought we were late."

Sor blinked and looked up. She had on a dark prisoner's suit and had taken the liberty of placing the wrappings adequately around her arms and legs. The suit had to adjust to her slim chest and wide hips.

By Fate! She was right. Sor parted his mandibles, "Let us move."

The Jiralhanae clasped the silver ring around her neck and her suit was activated. Her entire body stiffened, and yet still shivered from the cold. The black suit was designed to tighten in certain areas, plugging into the prisoner's nervous system and gaining full control of their body. It was not a pleasant feeling.

"He said 'MOVE!'" The Jiralhanae roared, spitting a bit on her head and shoving her forward with the bottom of his foot.

She only wrinkled her muzzle in disgust as she was allowed to stumble ahead.

The plasma wall hissed as it conformed to their armor. The female struggled to breathe as they tore down the corridors of the restricted section of High Charity.

The walls were smooth with a strong, purple metal, a variety of different colored lights pulsing softly along the walkways and the many doors and panels. Every now and then, there would be a window where space could remind any who looked into it how puny they were compared to its galaxies.

The hallways became more elegant and attractive as they came nearer to the heart of the High Council. Inscriptions were glowing along the walls, stories and legends of great warriors and prophets stored along the ceilings. Archways rounded the corners as the corridor opened up into a colossal chamber.

A bridge led up to the Council Chamber, guarded by honor guard positioned at attention along the edges. Statues of the previous Arbiters scowled down at them, each one towering up to the ceiling, and each one marking a great moment of victory for the Covenant. The grand city of High Charity spread out underneath the bridge, its dim lights and towering buildings stretching up toward them.

"Is it not all a bit exaggerated?" The female mused. Sor walked along behind them to ensure that she wouldn't try anything. She had already taken down two of his own men, his friends, and no doubt would have killed those Jiralhanae if it were not for the sacrifice of his men.

She would not shame him or his kind again. Not under his order.

"I have no time to worry about attractions or exaggerations, female. I have a duty much more important to attend to, unlike you." He snarled.

"Is that why you will not stop looking at my rear?"

Sor blinked. He hadn't realized it, nor was he thinking such thoughts, but he was indeed looking where his eyes did not belong.

He looked away immediately. His cheeks flushed a purple color (**2**) underneath his helmet and he looked down in embarrassment. This blasted female had gotten him again!

He frowned.

How had she seen him? He looked up, searching for some kind of reflection she could have used in the room. But her head was forced forward and there was nothing in the room to reflect him.

"How did you-?"

"Honor guard, did you polish your armor this morning? It is absolutely befitting." She said obnoxiously.

Armor. He looked at the Jiralhanae walking in front of her, and sure enough, on the backside of his shoulder guard was a reflection of Sor's scowling face.

The female smiled as they crossed the bridge and Sor growled ferally in warning. She was pushing his impatience toward rage. He exhaled sharply as they hurried past the lines of honor guard along the rims of the bridge.

The female squinted as they walked into the bright council room. The Council Chamber was loud. Councilors argued over the benches, some shaking their fists at each other from across the room. The Prophets sat high on their platform, looking up into the Councilor's chairs dully. They were clearly unamused with the situation.

The Prophet of Truth looked down at the prisoner's platform. He slowly rose his bony cheek from his knuckles, blinking his lazy milky eyes. He made an apathetic flick of his hand, and the entire room fell silent.

This time, everyone else felt like statues. The room was very taut. Sor felt he was the only one breathing. All heads turned and all eyes narrowed on the female. Sor had been before the Council many times, but even with all attention on the female, he felt an overwhelming wave of tension and couldn't help but to feel uncomfortable.

The female stood tall, looking each councilor in the eye. She was absolutely obstinate in her stance. Who did she think she was?

"Why is she wet?" The Prophet frowned.

"She would not wake, Holy One." Sor spoke acutely.

"Is this your excuse for your tardiness?" The Prophet droned, as if this wasn't the first time the issue had occurred. The Councilors began to take their seats as Sor began to speak.

"We would not have been so late were it not for the Jiralhanae taking their time in the cells." Sor motioned toward the two apes behind him.

"The Jiralhanae are your responsibility, 'Rolamee. You, as their higher rank, are accounted for their actions." Truth said with a sting of irritation and authority in his tone.

Sor bowed his head. "Yes, Noble Hierarch. I will ensure that it does not happen again."

The Jiralhanae smirked behind him. He would give them a suitable punishment after this trial without hesitation.

"Bring the convict forward." Truth beckoned with a curl of his long fingers.

Sor took a step back as the suit stiffened around the female, pulling her forward, alone before the center of the High Council.

"We only have records of the individuals registered here in High Charity. There are no records from Sanghelios... at least on you. Who are you, female?" Truth put quite bluntly.

There was a small pause, and the suit relaxed around her neck, allowing her to breathe more efficiently. She looked up and spoke loud enough so that all could hear.

"My name is Kalika 'Vadamai. I am a Noble of the Vadam State... and I am the consort of the heretic."

The room exploded into a sea of protest.

"The Arbiter is an aristocrat (**3**)!"

"Impossible!"

"There are no records!"

The Prophet of Truth rose his hand for silence. "Order!" Regret shouted. He didn't seem too happy to be here either.

"Thel 'Vadamee has no mate. His records would have said so." Truth pursued, placing his fingers beneath his chin.

"My name was cleared from all relating records when I became a Noble* of the Homeguard (**4**), shortly after 'Vadamee had been donned Kaidon (**5**). 'Vadamee made sure of this to protect our family from the assassinations."

A council member inquired out loud, "Your family?"

Kalika glared coldly at the armored councilor. "Did we gather before the Prophets today to discuss family issues or my sentence, Councilor?"

"Who do you think you are, female?!" The councilor shouted, rising from his chair.

"Stand down, 'Toronee." Truth said. "Control your temper."

Councilor 'Toronee glared at Kalika and she coolly returned the expression. It took will power to urge the councilor back into his seat.

Sor smacked his palm to his muzzle over his eyes. He had just been examining the ass of the Arbiter's wife. It wasn't likely that anyone in the room besides his previous company knew about it, but he still much rather to duck his head in shame and get out of there than to stand at attention as he did now.

"You are being charged of murder of two honor guard and the injury of three Jiralhanae, as well as heresy for attempt to stand against the punishment judged worthy by the High Council. It is understood that the punishment upon the convict is burning of the Mark of Shame, and execution by torture." Truth rested both arms casually across his chair as the room fell very quiet.

"Are there any objections?"

Kalika's suit contracted around her throat. No one stood or objected.

"Then this concludes this trial."

"Wait." Kalika forced the word, struggling for air. "Am I not permitted to give reasoning?"

"You are female. You have no voice or power here." One of the councilors growled.

"What reasoning? There is nothing to reason for." Another said from across the room, his voice echoing in the massive chamber.

"Let her speak." Truth mused.

The suit relaxed and Kalika inhaled before speaking again. Sor couldn't wait to see how she got herself out of this one.

"How or why I came to be here if none of your concern. I come before you now and I came at the time of punishment then because I felt strongly in the fact that Thel 'Vadamee's penalty was wrong."

The Council buzzed angrily with protest. Kalika spoke louder.

"You called him a heretic for managing a situation that he had no control over. You know this. And yet you parade him through the streets around the Council like a play toy. Where is the justice in that, Prophet of _Truth_?" She hissed his title scathingly. "The only reason of such acts would be to create an example of him."

"For what?! Are you suddenly biased by the Sangheili? You place the blame of the destruction of Halo on another just so you can smile before the crowds of High Charity without fear or resentment! Cowardice and guilt!"

"You go too far, female!"

"You dare question our judgment?!"

"Disrespect to the Prophets!"

"Heresy!"

Kalika turned her head, her eyes ablaze with anger. "Your judgment is false!"

The High Council became unglued. Councilors stood up trying to shout over each other, pounding their fists as the Prophets glowered down at the prisoner. Sor had never seen the Council so unhinged.

The Prophet of Regret rose his voice high. "And is this your idea of fair judgment, 'Vadamai?"

A hologram hummed to life from his chair, floating above the council in an explosion of blue photons. The pixels contracted into defined shapes and colors as the Councilors fell silent.

Thel 'Vadamee marched with tall pride in the hologram, his golden Covenant armor glinting dimly in the faint lights of the stadium. His HUD eye contacts darkened his true gold iris and made them black instead. He was accompanied by Tartarus, High Chieftain of the Jiralhanae, highly characterized by his wispy silver mohawk. The two same Jiralhanae that had accompanied Sor walked along behind them.

They halted at the end of the ledge, the crowds of Covenant warriors pulsing with the words, "Heretic! Heretic! Heretic!" Unggoy stomped their feet. Kig-Yar pumped their fists in the air. Yannme'e chattered excitedly on the roofs of the buildings. Jiralhanae snorted in disgust at Thel, and the Sangheili pounded their staves and pole-arms into the ground.

"If they came to hear me beg... they will be disappointed." Thel said, his voice distorted through the hologram.

The High Chieftain turned. "Are you sure?" Tartarus said, staring back at him questionably with a blazing golden eye. Thel's hands were bound with silver rings, similar to the larger ring around Kalika's neck.

All of a sudden the camera turned and zoomed into the crowd along the lower tiers. Kalika immediately recognized herself darting and shoving past Covenant soldiers. Two heavily armored honor guard charged after her. The camera followed them until they disappeared behind the columns leading up toward the ledge.

Bright orange arcs of light exploded from two pillars adjacent to Thel, wrapping around his arms, electrocuting and searing his skin. His eyes widened in shock, and he turned his head, his mandibles expanding in a cry of pain.

The cameras turned again, revealing Kalika 'Vadamai unleashing a flurry of punches into a Jiralhanae's head. She had him pinned to the ground, and his helmet was still rolling away into the crowd.

An honor guard came at her flank, charging with a pole arm pointed at her hearts (**6**). She lifted her knee, spinning on her other heel, leaning away from him and lashing out with her leg. The honor guard danced to the side, his chest barely skimming across her calf. The bottom of her foot instead slammed into a poor Unggoy's head, his body crumpling to the ground with a pathetic "Thud!".

Her leg was already outstretched. She hooked the honor guard around the waist with a bend of her knee, bringing her elbow around and digging her joint into his cheek directly below the eye. He roared, baring his sharp teeth in challenge as he recovered. She was ridiculously fast. He swung the pole-arm, jerking himself free of her trap. She bent down, crouching like a feline. She fell back on her palms, swinging on her shoulders, and swung her legs against his calves. He fell down hard on his back as his feet were kicked out from underneath him.

Kalika leaped up and grabbed the shaft of his pole-arm. Twisting it, his fingers were pried from the weapon, his wrists locked. He kicked at her with both legs, but she simply tilted her head and his boot barely missed. She jabbed two long fingers underneath his leg plate directly on a nerve in his thigh. His entire leg numbed as Kalika swung the pole-arm in her other hand. It was heavy for her nimble limbs, but as the honor guard let his comatose leg fall, she grabbed the pole-arm with two hands. Its golden blade glowed as she spun it backwards so that the butt of the pole-arm faced the honor guard on the ground. She thrust it behind her under her shoulder, ramming the blade through the chest of a different honor guard trying to grab her from behind.

Sor grit his mandibles as his friend died performing his duty. Purple blood seeped through his black armor as Kalika twisted the blade deeper through his hearts. She yanked the pole-arm out and stood tall. The honor guard in front of her shook his leg, his eyes narrowing on the crumpled body of his comrade. He glared at her and even under his helmet, she could see his face contort with rage. He roared, his teeth glinting as he set a crouched, offensive stance.

Kalika curled her lip, baring her own sharp teeth. She roared a challenge in return, drawing the eyes of the confused Covenant soldiers around her, her icy blue eyes wide and pupils slitted as she crouched down. They rocketed toward each other-

Kalika choked when a large hand caught her around the throat. She was slammed down hard into the ground. As her lungs burned for oxygen, she thrust the pole-arm as the honor guard came down on top of her in attempt to pin her down. Blood slid down staff of the weapon. The blade stuck out of the back of the Sangheili's neck, lodged in between his mandibles, and his body hung there, limp.

Sor's chest aggrandized with a heavy exhale through his thin nostrils to control his anger at the scene as his friend's body was unceremoniously flung off of the pole-arm.

The Jiralhanae holding her by the throat moved in on the inside of her arm, literally sitting on top of her. He snarled as Thel let up another roar of anguish, oblivious to the situation going on behind him. Kalika spun the pole-arm before two other Jiralhanae could move in. Both of them ducked away and the Jiralhanae straddling her got

smacked several times. When she flipped the pole-arm over, his face was slashed and he roared in anger, his yellow teeth gleaming with rotten saliva.

Thel was shed of his armor. His skin was smoking from the burns on his dark grey hide. His head was low, and he twitched wearily. Tartarus walked forward, snorting as he rose the brand of the Mark of Shame up into his hands.

Kalika thrashed desperately. The Jiralhane had managed to disarm her and now held her down. She shouted with rage, growling ferally and uselessly struggling.

Why was she still fighting? She was trapped. Defeated. Sor couldn't understand it. It was when the situation was most helpless that things truly began to unfold.

Kalika in the hologram circled her wrists, forcing both of the Jiralhanae's hands down. She sat up swiftly and slammed her head into the Jiralhanae's. He groaned as Kalika pulled herself up. She leaned and kicked him hard in the head. She shook her own neck as a horse would when snorting, blinking her eyes. Her helmet had absorbed most of the damage. Jiralhanae were very thick-headed. Literally. Kalika wondered if there was even any room for their brains.

Sor took this time to observe her armor. This was perhaps the only time that she wasn't a blur on the screen.

Her armor was made of a hard metal from her home planet's mountains, a traditional substance in Sangheili armor before they joined the Covenant, much like the Arbiter's armor. Her suit was ebony black, and down her belly and her back was a large blue stripe. This stripe was made from the wing of an Illura, a rare flying creature that dwelled in underground caverns and came out only once a revolution (**7**). Elegant curls and intricate symbols were engraved within the pale gold armor. Two energy daggers were strapped to her thighs and Fate knows what else on her complex belt. Soft feathers curved out from her helmet, the hocks, and the elbows of her armor. The plumage was a shimmering array of cobalt purple and icy blue feathers. He recognized that the feathers were from Shiraths; large, colorful, and friendly bird-like creatures also native to Sanghelios. The Shirath represented freedom in their culture and the Illura represented loyalty. Sor found it ironic that she was now a prisoner of her own people.

Kalika charged at Thel with incredulous speed.

"STOP!" She shouted, but her voice was drowned out by the explosion that emitted from the brand. Tartarus shoved the large brace over 'Vadamee's hearts. Thel's entire body shook as he kicked his head back, his mandibles stretching in another cry of pain. The Mark of Shame seared his flesh, scarring his chest forever with a symbol that would eternally remind others of his disgrace.

Before Kalika could get to him, a pillar exploded with orange light nearby. Kalika looked up in surprise, but was far too late to react when arcs of the electric plasma slammed her down. She cried out in shock and pain as her body was seared, racking her body with electricity and burning her with radiation and plasma. She started to crawl, dragging herself across the ground to get to Thel. The crowds

were oblivious, but blinked in confusion. From their points of view, it only seemed that the orange arcs were burning Thel again.

The three Jiralhanae returned. Just as the largest, heaviest armored Jiralhanae deactivated the pillar with a press of a button on a console in his hand, the other two grabbed her by the arms. They heaved her up and she hung limply in their grasp. She still drug herself, clawing her four toes into the ground and growling. She blinked, trying to see clearly after being blinded by the neon orange beams. Her limbs flinched and twitched. She was still trying to fight.

Tartarus finally pulled the brand away, and Thel, too, hung his head. He had gone unconscious from the pain a while ago, absentminded to the world.

The hologram disintegrated before their eyes, and Sor blinked, returning to the present moment.

"Well, 'Vadamai?" Regret pursued.

Kalika looked up at the Prophet as if just recognizing his existence.

"No, Prophet. No, that is not my idea of fair judgment."

She turned her head toward the Prophet of Truth.

"It is my idea of vengeance." Then she glared up at 'Toronee. "It is my idea of standing up for what I believe in; a right that should belong to any individual with a voice... male or female."

'Toronee narrowed his pupils at her.

"For your insolence and adamency-" Truth began.

"Insolence?!" Kalika retorted, both of her eye ridges furrowing together.

Truth spoke over her, "-I have decided to better complicate your punishment."

The Council murmured in agreement.

"What is-?!"

"Instead of shaming you and executing you after suitable torture..."

Sor looked up this time, giving the Prophet of Truth a curious expression. What punishment could be worse than dying a painful death, disgraced and dishonored by your own kind?

Every eye turned to the Prophet of Truth, with perhaps the same question on their minds.

The Prophet of Truth pressed all six of his fingers before his chin thoughtfully.

"You will be scarred by the Mark of Punishment, tortured privately

where you will be unheard. We cannot risk another incident such as this one. After that..." The Prophet looked up into the Council, estimating their reactions. So far, they seemed mollified by his words.

"You will be given a military rank among the Covenant. You will keep your Noble title and both of your blades."

Sor blinked in shock. The Council gaped, stunned by the Prophet's words. Kalika looked just as surprised.

"You will serve the Covenant. I will further detail you privately."

"Holy Hierarch..." An elderly Sangheili stood. He had clearly been familiar with the field of battle many times. "Surely, death would be a more suitable punishment."

"And waste such a variety of skill?" The Prophet looked down at Kalika. "I think not. Death is too easy of an escape from pain. Besides..." His lipless mouth curved into a sickening smile. "Why have her die with dishonor when she can live with it?"

Kalika glared hatefully at the Prophet of Truth, who gazed coolly back down on her.

"She will prove a distraction."

"It is against our customs to allow females to war."

The Council began to find their minds again. Some still stared dumbfoundedly at the Prophet of Truth while others began to speak up and murmur in agreement.

"Then she will operate secretly." The Prophet of Truth gazed up at the High Council. "This trial was never conducted. You will keep your mouths closed. No one outside of this room will hear of the words spoken here today, or you will face the severe consequences. All data logs will be cleared and destroyed. Am I understood?"

There was a long silence. Each councilor bowed their head. The Sangheili curled their fists over their hearts and the San 'Shyuum rose their fingers and opened their palms.

Truth nodded. "Honor guard, take Kalika 'Vadamai to the Observatory room. She is to wait there until I arrive."

Sor bowed his head. "As you wish, Noble One."

The ring reactivated around Kalika's neck and the suit contracted. Sor led her alone down the walkway, leaving behind a silenced Council Chamber. "You could not keep your mouth shut." He growled as they walked.

Kalika smiled softly. "No... I have them right where I want them."

Sor stopped and turned around. He glowered at her, activating his energy blade. The plasma hissed and sparked to life, wispy clouds falling from its edges. Its blue light lit up his face as he thrust

the edge to her throat, growling, "I do not know what you are planning, female. But let me warn you now. If you dare desecrate my honor again... if you dare harm my cause... my brothers, again..." He pressed the blade as far as it would go without slashing open the suit. "I will kill you."

Even with the suit on, she could feel her skin tingling with the heat of the plasma. She looked unblinkingly at him and slightly tilted her head. "And would an honorable soldier such as yourself draw arms on a weaponless, bound Sangheili?" She asked innocently.

Sor curled his lip. "You are not Sangheili." He deactivated his sword and clipped it to his thigh. "Not to me." He turned away with a snort, and led on. Kalika's mandibles pulled up into a soft smile and followed willingly.

****Author's Notes****
>

2) Purple is the color of blood of the Sangheili race.

3) Aristocrats, or swordsmen, do not marry and are the only ranks permitted to carry a plasma sword. They may mate with whichever female they choose, married or unmarried, in order to pass on the swordsmen genes. Most higher ranking Sangheili are aristocrats.

4) The Homeguard are the female soldiers on Sanghelios.

5) A Kaidon is a Sangheili leader of a state on Sanghelios. It is traditional that assassins pursue a new Kaidon to test his abilities in combat.

6) Sangheili have two hearts. This enables them to live twice as long as a human.

7) A year.

* A Noble is the equivalent of an aristocrat, but is female and is allowed to carry a sword.

4. Log 03

CONSORT

of the

HERETIC

Created By Cyber and Zmori

Written by Zmori

and ShoopWoop17

/Access Data Logs

20 October, Year 2552

Covenant Drop Ship Flying Over Forerunner Gas Mine, Planet

Threshold

15:46 Hours

CONNECTING...

LOG 03

Thel 'Vadamee pulled the ancient suit over his body. It was surprisingly fit for such an old model. The blue stripes were the most recognizable design of the Arbiter's suit. It was ebony black to contrast his heavy armor.

The silver metal reflected his face in its bright surface, but Thel saw only uncertainty there.

Only a couple of weeks ago, he was the Supreme Commander of an entire Covenant fleet. Then he was a heretic to be executed and shamed. He was a disgrace to his kind. And now, for whatever reason, the Prophets saw fit to give him a chance to redeem his honor and give him the highest rank possibly achieved among the Sangheili â€" the Arbiter.

Everything was happening so fast. What was supposed to come next? His standing and rank was shifting around so much to the point that he had to ask himself...

Who am I?

His hands answered him by turning the helmet forward and lifting it upward. He bowed his head and pulled it on top of his neck guard. The metal was cold against his muzzle, but it was a perfect fit.

He may not know who he was.

But he knew what he was supposed to do.

"Come on, beautiful." A voice said from behind him. Thel turned his head. Rtas 'Vadumee walked dismissively behind him, dressed in full white battle armor. Thel arched an eye ridge as Rtas patted the shoulder of the Stealth Sangheili (**8**) next to him. "Let's move." He yelled, walking toward the open doors of the drop ship.

The other soldiers stared at the Arbiter as they passed by him. Thel stood to the side for a while, watching Unggoy pester each other as they pattered their way up to the drop ship.

Thel exited the armory with the other Sangheili. Stray Unggoy ran around their feet, chattering and hurrying toward the ship. Some of them were too slow and were shoved around by Sangheili boots. A Stealth Sangheili got too annoyed and kicked an Unggoy away from him. The critter wailed as he flew through the air, landing on his face inside the ship.

Everyone acted as if nothing had happened. Armor clacked and pounded as heavy footfalls proceeded up the ramps. The ship was dark and slightly chilly inside. There were no windows and no seats. The Unggoy lined up in the middle as the Sangheili arranged themselves along the walls. Thel positioned himself in the back next to the door to the cabin. Rtas disappeared into the cabin and left his

lieutenant, Arsen, to attend to the men.

The hangar door hissed and began to pull up, closing with a soft click as the engines began to roar. Thel turned his head when the door next to him opened and slid into the walls. A minor came through, looking slightly rattled as if he had just walked in on something that he should not have seen.

"Sir..." He walked up to Arsen, stopping at attention in front of him. "A... spec-ops has been assigned to this mission."

Arsen frowned. "Why? We have enough soldiers as it is and we have the Arbiter to put down the heretics."

The minor bowed his head. "The Prophets have selected this exception to accompany this mission in secrecy."

Arsen exhaled sharply. "Bring him in."

The minor parted his four-way jaw as if to say something more, but he shook his head and turned. He disappeared into the door beside Thel again.

Thel frowned. He sniffed the air again. No, that couldn't be right. He checked again. And again. He didn't need to turn his head when Kalika 'Vadamai walked out from the door. His entire body stiffened.

What was she doing here?! How?! Why?! He finally willed himself to look at her with a wide golden eye. She glanced at him for a second and then turned her head away as if that one look was supposed to explain everything.

Even the Unggoy looked up in surprise at Kalika. All heads eventually turned to see what everyone else was looking at.

"Oh, hell no." Arsen growled.

"My thoughts exactly." Thel said, crossing his arms disapprovingly across his chest.

Kalika looked at Thel for real this time, smiling a sarcastic smile. "It's nice to see you, too."

Arsen snorted. "You know her?"

Thel scoffed. He narrowed his eyes, "You could say that."

Kalika and Thel almost glared at each other. Thel was so aggravated by her presence that he could feel his jaws twitching. He had left Sanghelios and gone to war all of these long years to ensure her protection. What was so important that she had to endanger herself and throw away years of fighting in this war-zone?

Oh gods.

And now he had to protect her from all of these goddamn aristocrats. Thel exhaled sharply through his thin nostrils, turning his head away from her. They were on their way now to perhaps one of the most dangerous zones possible; a forerunner gas mine swarmed with heretics

who despise the Covenant, and not to mention the giant radioactive storm that just so happened to be on its way to the mine. Their mission was to kill their leader, Sesa 'Refumee, and put out the heretic's lies.

Arsen squinted his red eyes. "Like hell I'm allowing a female on board." He spat. He looked Kalika up and down. "Much less, let her fight among our ranks."

The minor behind Kalika looked up. "The ship-master would like to see you, sir."

Arsen sighed and shoved past Kalika, growling deeply as he entered the cabin. Kalika curled her lip at him over her shoulder. She looked up at Thel again, crossing her arms over her chest. "I see the Arbiter's armor has not recognized you yet."

Thel blinked in confusion. "What are you talking about?" He looked down at his armor. Kalika shook her head.

"Nobody ever remembers." She sighed, looking toward the other Sangheili as if they were some sort of exception to her statement. They stared blankly at her.

She sat up off of the wall. "Before the Arbiter's armor is forged, an AI clones and places a part of itself in each of the armor models. It is a very primitive AI with a sense of honor, and will 'recognize a true Arbiter', turning the armor gold. Fal 'Chavamee (**9**) wore gold armor because the technology recognized him as a 'true Arbiter' for standing for what he believed was right, despite the Prophet's consent. Ever since the Prophets declared the Arbiter to be a rank given only to disgraced Sangheili, the armor has remained silver since. Take Ripa Moramee (**10**) for example."

Kalika put a finger to her lower mandible.

"You know... I find it ironic. Ripa Moramee... is considered one of the greatest and most loyal of the Arbiters to the Covenant, and yet his armor never recognized him." Kalika began to walk slowly down the walkway. The closer she got to the soldiers, the stiffer their postures became. The ripple effect was amusing to Thel. "Fal 'Chavamee was considered a heretic... and yet..." She leaned against the wall next to a Stealth Sangheili on the very end of the line. She smiled, "I suppose the Prophets never cared to share that information with you, now, did they?"

The black-armored soldier refused to look at her. His mandibles were gritting together and his fists were clenched. Whether he was angry, disturbed, maybe even both, it was hard for Thel to tell. Kalika stood there, looking up innocently with her intense eyes.

"Stop pestering my men, female." Rtas growled as he entered with a stormy entrance. Kalika shrugged herself off of the wall and walked slowly down the walkway once again.

"You are looking well, Rtas."

He strode up to her, ignoring her greeting, drawing himself up to look down at her. "I am to allow you on this mission despite our law." He said loud enough for everyone in the room to hear. "But you

will follow my orders and do exactly as you are told. You may be a Noble, but consider yourself a rank lower than even a minor. Am I understood?"

Kalika stood straighter and pounded her fist to her chest in salutation. Rtas turned his head away, curling his lip, "Get in line."

Kalika put her fist to her side and turned away, walking to the same wall Thel stood against. She set herself in the opposite corner and drew herself up.

Thel exhaled heavily. He would have a long talk with her in privacy when he got the chance.

Bright blue rings activated on the floor around the feet of each soldier, indicating that they were in space and on their way. The ship became very dark, and the only lights available were thin blue rods embedded in the armored walls.

Arsen paced up and down the walkways, checking armor and ensuring his men were in their best fit state.

When he came up to Kalika, he looked her up and down. "What is this?" He asked, pulling up on her chest plate. The armor clicked and pulled upwards with his motion. Kalika grabbed his hand, making him frown.

"I do not fight like you do. My armor adjusts to match my speed and flexibility. It's designed to absorb and distribute damage, not take it."

Arsen pulled his hand away. "You designed it?"

"Yes sir."

"What of the feathers?" He nodded toward her helmet.

"Excellent shock absorbers... sir." She tilted her head slightly at the last word.

Arsen made a "hmpf" sound of, perhaps, interest. "And these?" He made sure not to touch this time and motioned toward two rectangular prisms strapped to her thighs.

"My swords."

She pulled on one as Arsen took a step back. The strap clicked at her touch and the prism in her hand began to pulse a soft blue glow along the intricate designs in its black surface. She slid one thumb along a particular stripe as she put her arm out in front of her, angling the prism horizontally.

Plasma sparked and shot out one end in a flurry of silver-blue light.

"_Skira _(**11**)."

She activated the second prism, lighting the room with a silver-purple color.

"And _Anari_ _ (_**12**_)_."

She held the swords out in an "X" in front of her. Each plasma blade was as long as her arm. The blades shimmered and hissed as they took their forms and fizzed against each other. Dark and elegant lines, circles, and other intricate designs were notable along the centers of the blades. The blades themselves were curved as if they were each half of a full energy blade.

With another swipe of her thumbs, the plasma shrunk and dissipated into the air. She clipped the rectangular prisms against the straps on her thighs, standing straighter as the straps automatically secured the prisms.

Arsen looked up. "And your assigned sword (**13**)?"

"_Sarin (_**14**_)."

"Why do you not have it equipped?"

Kalika smirked. "If I did, it would tear this ship apart."

Arsen arched an eye ridge at her. "Oh?"

"Any other questions?" She asked subtly.

He tilted his head slightly, blinking his green eyes. He squinted and his pupils narrowed as if pondering something. After a long pause he asked in a low voice, "You have no respect for the military, do you?"

Kalika narrowed her eyes this time. "I have no respect for people who treat others as if they are machines." She corrected.

"Machines?" Rtas 'Vadum asked in amusement as he also returned from checking his men. Arsen took a step back and took his place in line with the others as the Special Operations Commander stepped forward before Kalika.

"Stuffing information into one's mouth and then expecting them to believe whatever you want them to believe, to do whatever you want them to do." Kalika said with a respectful bow of her head toward Rtas.

"And if we did not have order, if we did not tell them what to do, we would only have chaos." Rtas said.

"I completely agree with you." She lifted her head. "But let them follow you because they believe it is right." She glanced at Thel for a moment. "Not unwillingly or... blindly."

Rtas stared at her for a while. "Even as we are bound by our eternal oath?"

Kalika tilted her head. "And what oath is that?" She asked with a quirk of an eye-ridge.

Rtas smirked and pulled away, looking among his men. He rose his eye-ridges, "A woman who speaks her mind."

Thel's cheeks tugged upward slightly in the equivalent of a Sangheili smile. If they only knew...

Rtas began to walk up and down the walkways, shouting, "Warriors of the Covenant!" The Unggoy and the Sangheili stomped at attention.

"When we joined the Covenant, we took an oath!"

The soldiers replied in unison, "According to our station! All without exception!"

Rtas made a fist at the air before his waist. "On the blood of our fathers... on the blood of our sons, we swore to uphold the Covenant!"

A powerful chorus resounded, "Even to our dying breath!"

The Special Operations Commander continued down the walkway again, walking toward Kalika. "Those who would break this oath are heretics, worthy of neither pity nor mercy!" He spat, passing by a pair of Unggoy who were clearly unamused by his words. One altered the breathing apparatus of the Unggoy in front of him, pumping more methane into his tank. The Unggoy jittered in irritation, fussing in his speedy language at the other as he fumbled to fix the large tank on his back. "Even now, they use our Lords' creations to broadcast their lies!" Rtas continued as he passed Kalika.

"We shall grind them into dust!" The warriors growled.

Rtas stopped and turned. "And continue our march for Glorious Salvation!"

The soldiers stomped their feet again. Rtas turned his head toward Kalika. "That... is our oath." He said in a low voice.

Kalika crossed her arms across her chest, putting the bottom of her foot against the wall. "Inspiring." She mused as he walked away from her.

Rtas instead walked toward Thel, ignoring Kalika's comment. He looked the Arbiter up and down before stopping in front of him.

"This armor suits you... but it cannot hide that mark." He said with unblinking eyes.

Kalika looked down at Thel's chest, where, indeed, she knew the mark scarred him where she had failed.

"Nothing ever will." Thel replied.

Rtas' mandibles moved back and forth rapidly as he spoke, "You are the Arbiter, the will of the Prophets. These are my Elites." He motioned his head toward the soldiers behind him. Thel gave them a glance as Rtas continued, "Their lives matter to me, yours does not."

Thel met Rtas' thoughtful stare with an unwavering expression of certainty, "That makes two of us."

Rtas seemed as if he was about to smile, but instead tilted his head thoughtfully. "Hm."

The ship began to rumble faintly as they drew closer to a storm outside. A channel opened and a Jiralhanae spoke from Rtas' communication device. "Leader! There is no doubt. The storm will strike the facility!" The pilot said with a tinge of desperation.

Kalika couldn't understand a word that the pilot had said, but Rtas turned away and answered, "We'll be long gone before it arrives."

The blue rings began to glow brighter around their feet as the ship tilted upwards and rumbled to a stop.

"Prepare for departure." The pilot said over the intercom. Kalika sighed softly and sat up off of the wall. The circles lowered themselves under the soldiers and disappeared underneath the floor. Instantaneously, shimmering blue rays of light engulfed each soldier. They levitated there until they were pulled downward and disappeared to the ground below.

Kalika and Thel looked at each other for a moment. She smiled and motioned toward the ring in front of him. "Ladies first."

Thel hesitated and stared at her with irritation. But he exhaled sharply and stepped into the ring, feeling the pull of the blue light on his body. Kalika considered dropping in above him... but thought better of it and instead took the ring on the opposite side.

Thel touched down on the ground, turning his head to observe his surroundings. Even with the storm as far away as it was, he could feel it's winds hissing through the air. He assumed that they would only get worse as the storm progressed. He stood, drawing his energy sword and activating it.

"Warriors, prepare for combat." Rtas said over the communications device. Kalika followed Thel who began to run toward an opening in the floor and followed the other soldiers down the ramp. "We are the arm of the Prophets, Arbiter. And you are the blade. Be silent and swift, and we shall quell this heresy without incident." Rtas motioned toward a large door in the wall as Thel and Kalika came to the lower floor.

Kalika frowned and looked up at Thel, "Is he talking badly of me?"

Thel frowned as well, "Where is your communications?"

"They failed to give me one. They did not want me to be recorded or get access to their stations. I can't imagine why..."

Yes. I can only imagine.

Thel turned his head toward her, "In that case, yes."

"Cowardly bastard." Kalika growled.

They approached Rtas who took cover behind a large storage container as his men worked on hacking into the doors.

This was Thel's chance to get some answers.

"Commander, I would like to request a few minutes of privacy and absence from communications." Thel said.

Both Rtas and Kalika looked up at Thel. Rtas frowned, "There will be no mating in the field."

This time, Thel and Kalika both scowled down at Rtas.

The Commander exhaled and spoke into the coms, "How much time until you can get that door open, engineers?"

"Only a couple of minutes, sir." Arsen said.

Rtas nodded his head toward the other storage devices. "Make it quick."

Thel took the lead and walked with long strides to the other end of the platform. Kalika followed him behind one of the towering blocks.

"Look, if you're upset because I called him aâ€" what are you-?" Kalika's body stiffened as Thel wrapped his arms around her in a bone-crushing hug.

Eventually, she began to relax and returned it. He may be frustrated with her, but it didn't change the fact that he had missed her. He reminded himself that he didn't have much time. He pulled away reluctantly and his expression again shifted into one of irritation, "How is it you are here?"

Kalika blinked up at him, her hands resting on his waist, "By ship."

"Do not play games." He growled, deactivating his coms. "Why are you here?"

Kalika's face darkened and she lowered her eyes. Thel's expression softened as she began to speak.

"They came to the keep... and brought your body." She said gently. "They told us you were dead." She looked up at him this time. "I had to know the truth."

Thel blinked in horror, "You left our children alone?!"

"Quiet!" Kalika hissed when he rose his voice. "Of course not!" For whatever reason, she turned her head to check behind herself. "The Homeguard-"

"Let's move!" Rtas bellowed as the Sangheili warrior pulled away from the flickering screen beside the door. Thel's chest rumbled with a growl of irritation.

They pulled away from each other and walked out from behind the storage container together. He pointed a long finger at her, "This

conversation is not over." He said as he started to run toward the battalion entering the building. Kalika trotted along behind him.

"Unless, you know, one of us dies in the next couple of minutes." She commented.

Thel groaned, "You were always a show of optimism."

"I try."

"Silence." Rtas hissed. Thel reactivated his communications and walked inside swiftly. He turned and positioned himself against a second door. They stood in a smaller room made of metal and white concrete with a metal pillar supporting the high ceiling.

"Where is the female?" Arsen inquired, searching the room as the first wall of doors he just came through shut behind him.

Thel turned his head, not realizing that Kalika had disappeared. She was just behind him. "She can't be far." Thel mumbled, flaring his nostrils for her unique scent. It was almost as if she had vanished completely.

She had a bad habit of doing that.

"Engage active camouflage. Reveal yourselves only after the Arbiter has joined battle with the enemy!" Arsen commanded, activating his own camouflage device. His figure disappeared, save for a faint outline where the light bent. Every one else also shimmered away from view and they all stood still and silent, waiting for the Arbiter.

Thel didn't activate his sword, but held the handle up to his chest as his form, too, vanished.

"You may wish to do the same, Arbiter. But take heed. Your armor system is not as... new as ours. Your camouflage will not last forever." Rtas warned.

...You could have told me that before I activated my camouflage._
(**15**) But he did not say that out loud.

The doors clicked and parted into a much larger room. The soldiers quietly entered and Thel waited as his camouflage recharged. Just as the last soldier stalked out of the door, something caught Thel's eye. Two floating eyes stared at him from the wall in front of him. Thel blinked as one of the bright blue eyes winked at him and then both vanished from sight.

Thel shook his head, arming his weapon and camouflaging himself as he turned the corner, proceeding into the gas mine.

****Author's Notes*****
>

8) The Sangheili Covenant Ranks are as follows from lowest to highest: [Infantry: Minor, Major, Ultra, General] [Specialists: Stealth, Ranger] [Special Operations: Spec-Ops, Special Operations Officer, Special Operations Commander] [Honor Guard: Honor Guardsmen,

Honor Guard Ultra] [High Commanders: Zealot (Fleet, Ship, and Field Masters), Field Marshal, Supreme Commander, Imperial Admiral] [High Council: Councilor]

9) Fal 'Chavamee was an Arbiter, featured in a Halo episode called The Duel, who stood for what he believed in and disagreed with the Prophets. In doing so, they killed his wife after torturing her.

10) Ripa Moramee was another Arbiter featured in Halo Wars. He was extremely loyal to the Prophets and was killed in battle after having a... let's say... inflammation of the ego.

11) Brother Of War

12) Sister of Evanescence

13) Every Aristocrat/Noble that earns a sword is "assigned" to it. It is considered a part of them. This is why a Sangheili's sword is so important to them. It is unheard of to have a "dual-wield" sword, like 'Vadamai's. Their assigned weapon is often named, and can be referred to as their "assigned blade" or "soul blade", etc.

14) Twins Of Fate

15) Even Thel made that stupid mistake. Way to go, Rtas. Way to go.

5. Log 04

CONSORT

of the

HERETIC

Created By Cyber and Zmori

Written by Zmori

Edited by ShoopWoop17

/Access Data Logs

20 October, Year 2552

Forerunner Gas Mine, Planet Threshold

16:32 Hours

CONNECTING...

LOG 04

Kalika 'Vadamai made no noise as she crept up a steep ramp. She made sure to breathe slowly, inhaling through her nose and exhaling through her mouth only when she needed to. Adrenaline was already pumping through her veins. It was a familiar feeling to her, thus she had no issue steadying her hands over her swords. She pressed herself up against the wall as a heretic rounded the corner.

She stopped moving and held her breath as the armored Sangheili marched past her. He stopped at the foot of the ramp, lifting his nose to the air and sniffing loudly. Kalika kept her eye on him as she crept further up the ramp.

"What is it?" Another called from the floor where Kalika could see the camouflaged Covenant Stealth team spanning the room.

"I smell..." The soldier turned around and looked up the ramp. Kalika froze. "...Female."

The other smirked, "Missing Sanghelios, are we?"

"Silence." The heretic growled, drawing his large carbine up and walking slowly back up the ramp. Another rounded the corner and stopped at the top of the ramp. Kalika was trapped and the heretic was slowly closing in on her.

She gripped her swords tightly as he stopped in front of her, sniffing and searching. Where was Thel?

The heretic looked directly at her. It was now or never.

The other heretic on the ground floor let up a cry of pain. The Sangheili turned his head immediately, giving Kalika the opening she needed.

Skira hissed to life and bit through the heretic's neck. He choked and coughed blood gutturally. As Kalika's camouflage fell away and she kicked him hard in the chest, he widened his eyes at her. She was his last reminder of home as his body fell over the edge and crumpled into the bloody ground below.

Kalika spun around as glowing bolts of plasma streaked past her helmet. She yanked her head back, pulling Anari and Skira up to protect her upper body. She began to walk forward, swinging her swords' edges through the middle of needler shards and fizzing bullets of plasma. Her pace quickened as she dodged, slashed, and hacked. She advanced on the Sangheili heretic before her running at full speed. The heretic began to run backwards, his arms jerking as he fired his weapon at her. She leaped up ridiculously high with her bovine legs. As she sailed through the air, the heretic kept the point of his gun trained on her.

She touched down behind him. His head was bent all the way back already from shooting at her above him. She spun on her heels, falling to one knee to duck under some bolts that she anticipated were coming at her from behind, and slashed through the back of the Sangheili's neck. The bullets flying from his comrade's guns that were intended for Kalika instead embedded themselves in the Sangheili's upper torso. Kalika also kicked him hard down the ramp to join his friend.

The frenzied she-warrior spun around and glared at the Unggoy behind her. They blinked at her for a moment, trying to comprehend what had just happened. She curled her lip and growled as a feline would when it had trapped and cornered its prey.

Meanwhile, Thel charged at the enemy as he made his way up the

opposite ramp, expertly swinging his plasma blade through energy shields and stabbing through the heretics' hearts. The Covenant warriors followed behind him, firing weapons and throwing bright blue grenades into enemy throats. By the time they reached the top of the slope and made it to the top of the wall, Thel watched as Kalika already leaped over the edge and into the enemy territory below. She camouflaged in mid-air and landed on top of a crate of plasma being pulled along by a long strip of blue beltways.

Thel ran to the other side of the wall and took the ramp down as the rebels looked around in confusion at the sudden noise. They lifted and armed their weapons wearily. Thel activated his camouflage and ducked behind an armored crate, arming his sword for his target on the other side of the wall.

They were in some sort of mining deposit room. Plasma barrels bound together by metal pillars and contained by a clear glass within sat on a shimmering light blue strip of plasma. Large structures stood up at certain points alongside the two angled strips, providing suitable cover yet annoyingly blocking his view of the layout.

Thel spun around the corner, activating his plasma sword under his arm as his stealth device dissolved. With an outstretch of his arm, his blade slashed into a dead heretic's neck. Thel blinked at the sword already embedded in his head and frowned up at Kalika, "I had him."

"Well, I saw him first." Kalika called, leaping off of the large rectangular structure and onto another rebel. Thel followed her as heretic soldiers came at them from the sides. He pounded his fist into a surprised Sangheili's face. The Arbiter turned his head away and held his sword close to his body as he proceeded further down the slope of the beltways of plasma.

Kalika struggled to hold off a much bigger opponent on the beltway. They both hit, cut, and punched at each other as they were both carried along the strip carrying them down toward a large hole in the ground. This Sangheili was particularly tall and very well built. When she got too close, she regretted it and found herself in a close-combat situation with some one who was much bigger than she was. He swung his powerful fists at her as she ducked under his leg. She kicked hard at his knee and watched as he began to stumble. Instead of falling to his knees as she had expected, he used the momentum to bend his leg backwards and kicked her hard in the muzzle. Her head snapped back and slammed down heavily on the belt with a crackling noise of plasma against armor. The warrior reached down and grabbed her around the throat. He easily lifted her up off of the the ground and smiled cruelly at her as she clawed at his wrist.

The only reason that Kalika realized she was falling was because her stomach suddenly lurched up into her chest. She watched as the Sangheili holding her released his hold on her and disappeared into an abyss with a plasma crate. Kalika blinked in confusion and looked up.

The Arbiter growled with strain as he held her up by the wrist. She wrapped her fingers around his forearm as he lifted her up. "How many times do I have to pull you out of a big dark hole?" Thel grumbled as Kalika found her footing on the ground next to him.

"I had to pull you out of mine, last I saw you." Kalika mused with an arch of her eye-ridge. A tall Covenant soldier blinked at them both.

"Last I saw you was two years ago." Thel reminded her.

"I still have the bruises." she sighed.

Thel rolled his eyes and pulled away from her, checking the area for any other enemy soldiers. "That is sixty three for me." He mumbled.

Kalika began to chortle in amusement. "You still remember the count?"

"Always."

"Then you will remember that you still owe me twenty-three more." She reduced her chuckles to smiles.

Thel frowned, "Twenty-two."

Kalika shook her head. "Remember Reth?"

"That was seventeen revolutions past."

Rtas sighed in exasperation. "Have you all obtained the minds of children?" he inquired more to himself than anyone else.

"He started it." Kalika said, following the Arbiter to regroup with the Covenant Special Operations.

Just before Kalika and Thel passed by a large block structure, out of nowhere, a rebel Unggoy rounded the corner in front of them, flailing two armed plasma grenades in each hand.

The Arbiter spun around and slammed his palms to the wall at either side of Kalika's head, pressing his body up against hers just as the grenade exploded in a flash of blue and red. The Arbiter's shields flared purple and then resettled. "NOW, it is twenty-two." He said softly so that only she could hear. He pulled away from her again and followed Rtas without waiting as Kalika stared after him.

Two ramps on either side of the sloped platform led down to a lower floor underneath. Inscriptions and simple designs arrayed on the walls did little to appeal to the Covenant soldiers. The squad silently ran down the ramps, recharging carbines and plasma rifles as they went. Again, Kalika was nowhere to be found, but most could track her recognizable scent to the edge of a large opening into another twisting hallway.

The place may be a mining facility, but it was obviously designed for prevention of a break in. It was the perfect battle-field for surprise, making it a bit too easy to sneak up on the enemy, whoever that may be. The hallways twisted unnecessarily and crates, containers, and plasma charges were coincidentally placed about the floors.

Kalika scouted ahead. Her palms were on the ground, her waist low, and her legs flexibly outstretched behind her and under her belly.

She prowled around a corner and watched two Unggoy in maroon-gold armor waddle toward her. The bright blue liquid in their tanks sloshed around as they chattered to each other.

She pulled back and reactivated Anari. She inhaled quietly and prepared for a sneak attack.

Thel suddenly charged around the corner with a hot plasma grenade and tossed it at the Unggoy. He pulled back next to Kalika and held up his energy blade. As the walking Unggoy flailed his arms and the grenade exploded, Kalika threw her arms up in the air.

"Okay, now you are just being an ass hole."

Though Thel couldn't see her, he could feel the change in the air as she rounded the corner. He reached and grabbed her wrist. Kalika glared at him as he pulled her back.

"Please do not get yourself killed."

Before Kalika could reply, the sounds of heated needlers popped repeatedly behind her. She stepped behind his leg and grabbed the top of his chest plate. She shoved him down hard and they both fell to the ground as a sticky grenade sailed over their heads and instead landed on the wall behind them. Kalika's camouflage fell away in a hissing manner. She leaned down next to his ear and whispered softly, "Twenty-three again."

She rolled off of him and looked up as the grenade exploded and the team of Stealth Covenant came running through the entrance. Kalika disappeared and grabbed Thel's forearm, heaving him to his feet.

Thel spun around, wielding his sword once more and charging behind Kalika toward the enemy. As the heretics focused their fire on the Arbiter, Kalika sneaked behind them. Thel let up a battle cry and the Covenant warriors followed behind him.

Kalika sliced her sword through an Unggoy's throat, smashing his tank with the butt of her other sword. The Elite next to her whirled around with his gun as she leaned to the side on one leg. She dug the bottom of her foot into his face with enough power to kick his head back. She spun and crouched, leaning in the same direction and swinging her arm out in a fluid stroke. The plasma blade slashed across his chest. Arsen came up behind the heretic and shoved his energy sword up into his back and out his chest as Kalika flipped her sword in her palm and dug the tip of her blade through his belly.

They both pulled their swords out of his body at the same time. The enemy choked as his blood trickled along his mandibles and seeped from the crevices in his armor. To ensure his death, she spun around, flipping her sword again and slashing through his throat behind her. She kept the movement going and flicked her sword upward to leave a large gash across another Sangheili's face. He cried out, only to be silenced by a mouthful of plasma as Rtas lit him up with his rifle. Thel closed in on the last opponent. The rebel growled and lowered his stance, baring his teeth at the Arbiter. Thel didn't hesitate to kick off of the ground and charge. They both activated their blades with a series of hissing and spitting noises at the same time, and at

the same time they thrust their swords at each others' throats.

Their swords clashed again and again in a flurry of expert swings and ferocious slashes. His opponent attacked repetitively, and Thel blocked, parried, and finally stepped to the side to let him stumble past him. Thel managed to slash him across the back with the tip of his blade. The heretic spun around and came at him again.

The Sangheili slammed the flat of his energy blade against Thel's. They shoved hard against each other. Now it was a test of strength. Their arms shook as they pushed as hard as they could against the other.

It was obvious that Thel was winning. Thel took a step forward, shoving him backward, and slid his sword upward along his. When the tip of the blades were barely touching, Thel suddenly rotated his sword and pulled it downward again so that the inner spoke of his blade slid down the middle of the heretic's. Thel held his sword up horizontally and shoved it deep into the rebel's chest. Thel tore his plasma sword out and turned away as the enemy fell to the ground onto his knees.

"You know not... what you are fighting for... Arbiter." The enemy gasped as he clenched his palm over his wound. Thel stopped. "The Prophets... have blinded you... please see reason... before it is too late..." The Sangheili fell onto his chest and lay silent.

Thel stood there and stared for a while at the wall across from him. Arsen growled and continued down the hall, "Do not let them corrupt you. You are the Arbiter. You have no right to be infested with their trickery."

The Special Operations Commander took the lead and his men followed closely behind with their weapons at the ready as they rounded the corner. Thel followed and shook his head. Arsen was right. He couldn't allow himself to be led astray.

Bodies were strewn across the floor. Thel blinked and looked up. Kalika was leaning against the opening into what looked like a large elevator. She looked up from scraping blood off of her gloves. "You took your time."

The soldiers stepped around and over bodies. Several wrinkled their noses at the intense metallic smell. They boarded the elevator and lined up against the walls. Kalika looked up as Thel stepped on last. She hopped on at the last moment after Thel pushed a button on the holographic console.

Faintly through the thick walls of glass, they could make out a large ship hangar. A Covenant ship hovered in the middle of a wide room. Kalika had disappeared again and silence crept on the men as they anticipated the battle to come.

"Sentinels!" A soldier said. "The holy warriors of the sacred rings. Why have they sided with these heretics?"

Sure enough, floating machines with metal fins and glowing blue lights lifted plasma crates within their anti-gravitational tools down below. A silence filled the elevator as they watched.

"Are you two... um...?" A single soldier next to Thel began. The Arbiter looked down at him with an arched eye ridge.
"...Together?"

"She is my wife, yes." Thel turned his head away.

"...Oh." The soldier nodded and looked back down at the floor. "Is she always that..." Thel arched his ridge at him again. "...Nice?" He finally stuck to a word.

Thel looked up as the elevator began to slow down. "I do not think Kalika should be the most of your concern at the moment."

The soldier on his other side elbowed him hard in the ribs for his stupidity as the group fell quiet. The elevator opened into the hangar, and with it, an obstreperous rally of plasma rained down on them. Their shields flared a bright purple to protect their wearers. The Stealth group disappeared entirely and they split apart. Each individual took their place and dispersed through out the room just as they had planned before they had arrived at the facility.

"Arbiter, clear the hangar and open its doors so I may drop the second batch." The pilot suddenly came in over the communications.

Thel turned his head and his eyes darted back and forth, searching for some kind of control panel. A golden armored Sangheili charged at him at full speed in front of him. Thel spun around to attack, but another figure suddenly appeared in front of him.

Kalika stepped forward and punched the Sangheili's throat as her blade elongated from her fist. She yanked her sword out of his neck as her other weapon stuck him in the gut. "Either side of the door!" She yelled as she kicked the heretic down on to the ground.

"...What?"

"The panel!" She disappeared again.

"Oh."

Thel turned and faced the large hangar doors at the back of the room. The bay was divided into three floors with ramps leading down to the ground floor and others going to the top.

Thel ran down a slope from the middle floor and proceeded along the outer edge of the bottom floor. The hijacked Covenant ship behind him began to hum with life. Up ahead, sure enough, two panels blinked bright blue and purple colors. Sentinels swerved around in the air above him, their lasers humming with power as they trained their weapons on him.

Kalika ducked under a long stroke of a plasma sword above her head. The gold armored Sangheili desperately swung his sword at the darting enemy. His other comrades were hesitant to draw their blades against a female, and so now they lay in their own blood around his feet. He had never fought against an opponent like this. No matter how fast he

swung his weapon at her, she somehow dodged out of the way or parried with her own unique blades. She was fast. He would give her that. That meant he only had to hit her once hard and she would crumple like a leaf.

Those eyes were distracting. There was no possible way that those were her natural eyes. Even her skin coloration was a bit hard to believe. Put simply, everything about her was hard to believe. Her very existence at war was the most confusing to him.

But she was just as real as the blood of his friends staining his boots.

He stopped swinging and stood there, panting. His chest heaved with harsh breaths. She was gone. His armor was heavy on his body. The spines on his back rattled as he slowly stood up. His nostrils flared as his mandibles twitched. His eyes searched for the female.

All he could see were storage containers. Shadows lingered on the walls...

Two icy blue eyes opened and stared directly at him from the wall. They aggrandized suddenly and floated before him. He allowed instinct to take over.

He grabbed her muzzle in his fist and threw her to the ground with a twist of his arm. Her form came together in what was thought to be empty space. Her sword flung upwards toward his throat in his peripheral vision. He barely turned his head in time. The plasma seared his suit and sent shivers into his skin as the armor clacked to the floor, steaming beside him.

He tore her helmet away after he pinned her down to the ground, kicking away her swords. She was on her belly and he dug his elbow into her mid-back. He grabbed the nape of her neck where her skin was purple and red with bruises. She cried out more in aggravation than pain.

Cuts and slashes purpled her blueish skin. Bright, sky blue freckles were speckled around her enraged eyes. His hand was under one of the neck-armor shafts and had a fist full of her nape. When she struggled, he gripped harder and pulled up. She didn't like that very much.

He lowered his muzzle and hovered barely inches from her face. She curled her lip and snarled at him as he inhaled her scent noisily. "Do you know..." he whispered softly as his fist tightened again and she winced, "...how long it has been since I have enjoyed the pleasures of a female?"

The hangar doors began to pop and clank loudly. The heretic looked up suddenly as the metal plates peeled vertically away from each other and sheathed themselves within the wall.

When he was distracted, Kalika twisted her shoulders and shoved herself up from the ground with her palms. He blinked in surprise at her sudden movement as she flipped herself over. He slammed his elbow into her belly before she could sit up. Her eyes widened in pain as the air in her body left her lungs. Before he could pull his head away, she inhaled forcibly, hissed, parted her mandibles, and bit

down hard on his exposed throat. Her teeth sank into his flesh and purple blood erupted from the wound. He gaped and choked from her unexpected attack. She released only to bite down hard again and twisted her head. He rolled over onto the ground, gasping and gurgling. She rolled with him and clenched her jaws again around his esophagus. His neck made a funny cracking sound. Kalika pulled back and tore a chunk of meat from his throat. Dark, thick, warm blood soaked his suit and stained the floor. She spat the flesh onto the ground. She sat up in a crouch a whirled around.

Her eyes were wild and her teeth were slick, dripping with blood. A feral growl rippled through her throat and across her curled lips. She drew her sword from the ground and roared at the Sangheili standing before her, splattering blood on his face.

Arsen yelled in alarm and stumble backwards. "By the Rings, woman, it is me!" he growled as he wiped his face with both hands. Kalika blinked and lowered her sword. She stood up and walked around him as he continued to mumble in disgust.

Thel nodded his head several times as Kalika passed him and spit blood on the ground. "Yes... she is pretty nice."

The younger Stealth Sangheili beside Thel stepped out of her way and stared after her.

Thel turned and followed her. Kalika stopped and turned her head. Thel wrinkled his nose and his mandibles tugged upward nervously at the blood smeared on her face. "You have got a bit of something in your teeth, there."

She licked her teeth with the tip of her tongue. "Want a taste?" She asked teasingly.

Thel smirked, "I am afraid I will have to pass." He stopped beside her. "You are slower than usual." His eyes wandered to the bruises and cuts at the top of her neck and frowned. "What is this?" He pulled on her suit with his forefinger and his thumb, revealing deeper wounds along her throat. Kalika pulled away to reach down for her helmet.

"Convincing the Prophets and the High Council to allow me to accompany you came with a price." She said as she pulled her helmet over her head.

"You did not have to come." The Arbiter said as she picked up her swords and clipped them to her thighs.

"Yes, I did." She kept her eyes lowered as she re-tightened the armor around her neck.

It suddenly came to Thel. "Did they mark you?" he asked in horror.

Kalika met his wide eyes with an agitated glare. "We will discuss this later."

She started to walk away, but Thel grabbed her forearm. She cringed as Thel growled, "No, we will discuss this-"

She stopped him with a look, daring him to keep talking. He grit his mandibles and exhaled heavily as he released her.

He hadn't noticed the large Covenant ship hovering in the room. Reinforcements were deposited from the drop ship and made their way up to the Stealth group on the third level.

Rtas tilted his head at Kalika, "Are you not going to wipe that off?"

Kalika shook her head, "I am saving it."

Rtas blinked in confusion and looked over at Thel as if he was supposed to know. The Arbiter turned his head away and instead observed the team approaching them. But his mind was elsewhere.

He knew his wife was crazy, but she never lied. At least not in public or she would end up embarrassing herself. Her body... reacted when she wasn't telling the truth. Her dodging of his questions was the only answer he needed. He exhaled heavily.

Rtas made his way for the drop ship as the reinforcements arrived. Kalika walked to the edge of the platform and looked down upon the battle below. Her pupils narrowed as she observed the troops fanning in the opposite sides of the room. A low whirring sound grew louder and louder beneath her feet.

She frowned and looked down. A large flying machine was rising fast and shot upwards in front of her. Her eyes widened and she moved for her swords as she started to step backward.

Thel suddenly grabbed the top plate on the back of her armor and yanked her back behind him as his other arm swung his sword through the Sentinel. The machine whirled and sputtered in a series of sparks as its body was slashed in half.

"Twenty-two." He said as he watched it fall to the bottom below.

"I had it." She said acidly.

"You are welcome."

Down below, the Sentinel fell on top of an Unggoy in gold armor. Thel cringed and looked away.

"Cover the ship!" Arsen commanded. Heretics aimed their fuel rod guns up at the Covenant drop ship. The team dispatched and ran down the ramps while others aimed their Type-51 Carbines and sniped the enemy's heads.

The heretic's ship rattled and swayed as it hovered above the explosions of grenades and the impacts of fuel rod ammunition.

Thel followed Kalika, running along behind her. "You know, you are not too appreciative of me." He said as they joined the battle field below.

"I married you, did I not?" She retorted as more heretics poured into the room from a newly opened door on the very bottom floor.

Instead of reaching for her swords, she leaned down and picked up an unused Type 33-Guided Munitions Launcher (**16**). Thel sheathed his sword and attached it to the clasp on the outer side of his thigh. He wielded his secondary weapon, a Type-25 Directed Energy Rifle (**17**) as he spoke, "And that is supposed to mean something?"

Kalika was leaning down again to dual-wield a Type 25-Directed Energy Pistol (**18**) and she sat up fast to arch both of her eye-ridges at him with a knowing look. Thel put both of his hands up, "That did not come out like I thought it would."

"I hope not!" Kalika yelled as the heretics charged at them. She aimed both of the guns at the heretics and squeezed her fingers around the triggers. She yelled over the gun fire, "It is not as if we have been married for more than thirty years!" When the heretic got too close, she crouched down, leaned forward, and then stood up suddenly. She jabbed the energy pistol up the heretic's mandibles and held the trigger, "It is not as if I mothered your children or put up with annoying relatives, alone at home for twenty-seven years, awaiting for the end of a stupid war!" She finally stopped firing the gun and kicked the heretic to the ground. She motioned her hands outwards, "Where is my appreciation?!"

Thel was in the middle of firing his rifle at the heretic charging toward him with an energy sword. "We had visits in between those twenty-seven years! Do not try to exaggerate the situation!" He replied as the heretic fell at his feet.

Kalika turned to face him, "Right! And I was the one who came and the only thing you were interested in was bending me over your desk!" She started to run toward the open door where the enemy was coming through.

It was Thel's turn to spread his arms. "Was it really necessary to say that in front of everyone?" he yelled after her and put away his gun. Kalika didn't wait for him and walked forward as he fired the needler and the plasma pistol at the same time at the door. Unggoy and Sangheili backed away against the wall behind the door as their comrades fell to the ground next to their feet.

"Aw, I am sorry, love." She said with a mocking tone of pity. "Did I embarrass you in front of your friends?" She walked through the doorway after cloaking.

She spun around and elbowed a heretic in the side of his face. He cried out as Kalika revealed herself again and kicked an Unggoy hard in his head. She fired the needler at the first heretic with her head turned the other way. Her eyes narrowed on the larger Sangheili in the corner who stared at her with wide eyes.

The small hallway was silent for a moment. Kalika slowly stepped over bodies and held her intimidating gaze with the larger heretic. She curled her lips, revealing the stained blood on her teeth. The heretic's gun shook and his eyes were wide with fear.

"Stay back! Please! I do not want to shoot you!" He yelled. Kalika tilted her head inquisitively.

"You will not have to." She said softly.

Thel appeared next to the heretic, activated his sword, and rammed it through his gold chest plate and his hearts. The heretic gasped and dropped his gun, gasping for air as his body loosened. Thel twisted the blade and tore it away. The heretic gave him a haunted look of horror and confusion as his body fell to the ground limply.

"Thank you." Kalika bowed her head and held her guns back up as she neared the next left corner of the hall.

Thel ducked behind a storage container laying on its side as more troops came around the corner and fired their carbines and rifles at him.

"And it was not over my desk!" He yelled, standing to fire back at the heretics.

"I am so sorry, Lord Details!" She said sarcastically and also turned the corner to fire at the Unggoy and Sangheili down the hall. "I don't have your talented memory!"

Thel ducked again as the heretics returned fire. "If you are going to talk about our sex life in front of others, get it right!"

"I really should not be hearing this." Rtas groaned over Thel's communications.

"I will say." Arsen said as he followed behind Kalika, who also took cover behind the wall. Thel armed a grenade after the heretics were done firing at him. The blue ball fizzed bright clouds of radiated plasma as he threw it with his left arm. It stuck to a heretic's arm down the sloped hallway and exploded in a show of bright blue light. The Stealth troops ran around them and camouflaged themselves as they ran down a hall that twisted downwards and opened into a larger room.

Kalika started to smile as she followed the team down the corridor. "I did not realize that you were so concerned with your social standing." She said sarcastically.

They both camouflaged as they trotted into the large room. Great pillars held up the ceiling and a second floor acted as a platform on their half of the room. Several other plasma belts carried battery charges on the taller side of the room. Their goal was a door on the other side of the room where the heretic's leader was already running from them.

Thel led the way and the Stealth team fell behind them. Several heretics looked up the door and armed their weapons. Thel hid behind a column holding up the second floor. He made the first strike by arming another grenade and turning around the column. He tossed it at the cluster of Unggoy by the exit door and his camouflage automatically fell away. "I am very concerned!" He yelled at Kalika, who made her way toward the ramp up to the second floor.

"Since when?!" She called back. She charged at a Sangheili heretic and aimed her guns at his head. A flurry of green plasma flew from her pistol and hissed against the enemy's flaring purple energy shields. Her needler clicked and kicked back with each crystallized plasma bolt that exploded from its sockets. Her arm jerked as she

held down the trigger to the needler, and multi-tasked, squeezing the pistol's trigger repeatedly.

She aimed the needler at an Unggoy running toward Arsen with a grenade as the pistol remained trained on the Sangheili in front of her. The heretic looked around in confusion and started to back up on the ramp.

Kalika's cloaking device deactivated with a hum as she advanced on him with her guns. The Unggoy heretic fell to the ground and his grenade went off. Kalika walked up the ramp and aimed both of her weapons at the heretic, who ducked behind a storage container.

Kalika squeezed the trigger on the pistol and held it. She ran at full speed as the pistol began to hum and glow brighter. She leaped up on the container, stomped twice, stopped before she got to the edge, and then crouched. The heretic stood up at the sounds of the enemy approached and pointed his weapon forward, expecting her to come over the edge.

She threw down the needler and reached around to grab his muzzle. She twisted his head and reached around with her other arm to shove the glowing pistol's tip against the roof of his mouth. He cried out before Kalika released the trigger, silencing him.

She dropped him and hopped down. She pressed her body as far as she possibly could in the corner against the wall and the storage container. She turned the inside of her wrist upward and pulled on one of the armor shafts. The small black stripe on the back of her forearm clicked and a very thin rectangular prism stuck up. She pulled it out and pinched its side. She pulled and opened it like a fan. It began to create a circle and closed itself. A dim blue light flickered on at the center.

"Code name, X-5." Kalika spoke softly. She focused her gaze on Thel and Arsen who fought the battle below. "Find the coordinates to the map. Only you." She blinked several times and the silvery metal disk in her hand blinked its light back at her. "I have my reasons." She slid the disk under the storage container and pressed the button in the middle. Numbers represented in the Sangheili characters began to count down on one side of the holographic screen.

Thel made his way toward the door on the other side of the room as the last heretic fell to his knees. The door parted as he approached it. He ducked his head and camouflaged.

"Camouflage engaged." Arsen confirmed quietly behind the Arbiter. The hallway sloped downward and split into a "T" at the edge, each with a door on the ends. Two Sangheili opponents paced the hall.

Thel approached one and flipped his gun over. He hit the heretic hard on his head with the butt of the carbine, twisted the gun again, deactivated his camouflage, and fired the weapon at the enemy. His shields were turning red and Thel's gun suddenly clicked and sputtered.

Thel frowned and stared at the empty meter on the gun. It was out of ammunition. The heretic and the Arbiter stared at each other for a while.

A blade shot out of the heretic's throat, startling both the heretic and Thel. Kalika yanked the sword away and kicked the back of his knees. The locked door behind her flickered into a blue color to signify that it was open. As the heretic fell to the ground, Kalika grabbed the Arbiter's arm. She pulled him forward with a commanding, "MOVE!" Thel stumbled forward as a grenade exploded behind him and launched him forward. Almost 700 lb. of heavily armored Arbiter slammed her into the column behind her, exploding the air in Kalika's lungs from her body.

Thel's shields barely activated in time to deflect the grenade. His head began to throb painfully. He groaned and slowly pushed himself off of the wall with one arm as his radars flashed red, indicating that he needed to recharge before he took damage again. Kalika gasped for breath and began to slide her back down the wall. Thel blinked in shock and caught her before she fell.

"Oh gods, did I-?"

"Yes." Kalika choked and wrapped her forearm around his to hold herself up. Both of their shields began to regenerate as Kalika panted desperately for oxygen. Thel's beeped to indicate that they had fully recharged, and then Kalika's. She finally found the ability to breathe again and slowly stood up. She still held onto his arm.

"Do you need to sit-" Thel began.

"No." Kalika interrupted coldly.

Thel lifted his head, "I am just trying to-"

"Then do not." She let go of his arm and sat off of the wall to show that she didn't need his support anymore. He stared at her for a while, as if he was looking for something or searching for some kind of meaning behind her words. He exhaled heavily and released her.

They turned toward the newly opened door beside and Kalika took the lead. She picked up Skira and armed Anari in her other hand. She started to enter, looking side to side in the darkened room.

"The heretic's leader is this way." Arsen called after them. Thel turned his head to look at him.

"We are just searching the room. It should not take long. Keep going." Thel reassured him. He followed Kalika inside and the doors closed behind him.

Arsen frowned. They were not supposed to do anything without the Arbiter. Those were Rtas' orders. One of the Stealth troops, the same one that had elbowed his friend on the elevator, walked alongside Arsen as he continued down the other side of the hall.

"This cannot turn out well for us." The soldier said in a low voice.

"What?" Arsen asked in the same tone.

The soldier looked at him directly, "I think that we can all agree that this... 'exception to the law' will cause severe consequences in the future, if not now, if not for us."

"And if not for us?" Arsen kept his reptilian red eyes narrowed ahead.

The soldier's mandibles drew in closer together, "For her."

"I did not realize that you cared." Arsen said in amusement.

"We all do." The soldier replied quietly.

Arsen looked at him this time, "Why? She is only a female."

"Yes, we may look down on her for that, but you said it yourself. She is female, indeed, and for that..." The soldier paused for a moment. Arsen quirked an eye-ridge at him, silently asking him to finish. "...we will do what it takes to ensure that she gets home safely."

"...The others feel this way, as well?"

The soldier nodded, "It is cruel that she is here. She is a distraction to the men-"

"But she gives you a new motive to fight." Arsen finished, staring thoughtfully at the wall ahead of him.

The soldier exhaled heavily, "We just want her gone."

"You know that I have no control over that matter. It is the will of the Prophets. Their word is our bidding. Our law. It is not our right to question them, as these heretics do." Arsen said and stopped at the end of the hall.

"Yes sir." The soldier bowed his head.

Arsen looked up, "There you are, Arbiter."

Thel came around the corner behind them and nodded his head toward Arsen. "There were only Unggoy in the room." The Arbiter said and walked past him.

"Where is the female?" Arsen frowned.

"...She will be along shortly." Thel confirmed and entered the next room.

This room was a tall hallway that curved to the right. Beams ran along the ceiling to support the heavy walls. Containers were lined up against the walls and enemy Unggoy were curled up on the floor, sleeping. The Sangheili were leaning against the walls or pacing restlessly down the main path.

Thel came through the door. The Stealth team was camouflaged behind him, according to the yellow dots on his radar. They were not seen yet by the heretics because of the wall that surrounded them before opening into the room. Thel inhaled shakily and nodded his head toward the two sleeping Grunts on the others side of the

room.

Kalika wielded Skira and Anari as her camouflage shimmered and powered down. She flipped each sword and fell to the one knee in between the Unggoy and stabbed through their backs.

They flinched and warbled but eventually fell silent. Kalika stood and pressed herself up against the wall, hidden in the shadows as she waited for her camouflage to recharge.

Thel activated his own cloaking device and turned the corner. The Stealth team followed closely behind and began to disperse through out the room. The Unggoy took positions in the corners. The four Sangheili stalked behind an individual heretic, waiting for the Arbiter to make the first strike.

Thel was mid-way down the hall and took position behind a particularly taller Sangheili. He grabbed the top of the enemy's helmet and yanked his head back. The heretic began to cry out and tried to pull away, but Thel's blade was already slicing across his throat. The heretic collapsed to the ground and Thel stepped forward to take on the next opponent.

Two sentinels flew overhead and shot blazing orange lasers down at the men. Arsen spun around and fired his plasma rifle at one as Kalika leaped out of nowhere from one of the beams on the ceiling and tackled one of the flying machines from above. The Stealth team had already taken care of assassinating the heretics on the ground. As Kalika slashed apart one sentinel, the others fired their weapons at the other.

The Sentinel under Kalika's feet swayed and began to smoke. She angled herself forward and clipped her swords to her thighs as the Sentinel began to drop in elevation. She shoved off of the sentinel and flipped backwards just as the machine exploded in a cloud of smoke and clacked to the ground. She grabbed one of the ceiling beams and grit her mandibles in pain. The feathers along her elbows sparked a bright blue color as they absorbed the impact.

Kalika swung her legs upward and pulled her body up on top of the beam. She shook her wrists to rid of the annoying, tingling sensation. When she was ready, she looked down to observe her options. She placed the bottom of her foot on the slanted beam and slid down the long slide to the other side of the room. She pressed down hard with her feet at the edge of the beam and twisted her body in mid air. She kicked down from the opposite wall and landed on the bottom floor in a crouched position with her palms to the ground and her chest inches from making contact.

The taller soldier who had previously spoken with Arsen looked up in awe at the beams as she stood, "How did you get up there?"

Kalika patted his shoulder as she passed him, as if that was supposed to explain everything.

Thel inhaled and flared his small nostrils. "Their leader went this way."

He led the way to another dark silver door with bright blue lights. Kalika kept to the back of the group, her eyes darting rapidly across

the walls as if she were expecting something to reach out and grab her. They entered yet another hallway, but this one was shorter and wider. Two doors were on the opposite of theirs; one up ahead, the other to their left.

Two Sangheili heretics came from the door ahead, followed closely by four Grunts. They charged toward the Covenant Stealth team, firing needlers, rifles, pistols, and carbines. The Stealth troops camouflaged and surged to the outer edges of the walls, avoiding enemy fire.

Thel took on the first Sangheili and slammed his face with his fist. The heretic fell into the others, blinking in surprise and flailing his arms.

The Stealth team advanced inward and aimed their guns as their cloaking devices fell away. Plasma rained down on the pile of heretics. The Unggoy wailed and the Sangheili yelled as the plasma seared their bodies.

"That's enough." Thel said and stepped away from the group. The heretics were silent.

Kalika revealed herself and stood by the door on the left side of the hall. Thel armed her carbine and exhaled heavily as he walked toward her. She stepped out of the way, refusing to make eye contact with him.

The Arbiter quickened his pace and the door hissed at his presence. Behind its shafts, a large room exposed itself. Windows opened into the skies where the electric green and red storm howled and pounded its winds against the facility. Thel's golden eyes narrowed on a Banshee taking flight from the platform outside.

The heretic's leader was running away like a coward.

"Deal with them, my brothers! I will defend the Oracle!" He shouted as the golden armored Banshee flew away.

Thel began to run for the exit to the outside. The four Sangheili behind him scouted the room for any hidden enemies as the Arbiter ran across ramps and slopes to get to the doors on the left side of the room.

Thel stopped and pounded his fist on the red flashing door as the leader called from his Banshee, "It's truth must not be silenced!"

The door on the right side of the room turned blue and opened. Three Grunts in gold and blue armor charged into the room and aimed their needlers at the Stealth team. The taller Stealth soldier appeared by the door and fired his carbine at the Unggoy.

"Ral!" Arsen shouted as the Unggoy heretics fell around the soldier's feet. The soldier looked up in confusion, but turned his head too late.

A Sangheili heretic stood before him, glaring acidly at him. The Covenant soldier looked down at the heretic's arm where he held his energy sword deep within his belly. The heretic tore his sword out

and kicked the Covenant warrior off of the platform to the lower level below.

Arsen roared with rage and aimed his weapon at the heretic's head. Thel also hefted his carbine to his eye and aimed at the second Sangheili's head. Gun fire popped and fizzed across the room.

Eventually, the heretics' shields failed them. They both collapsed to the ground as their shields sputtered and crackled.

Thel ran again, toward Arsen. The enraged Sangheili gently lifted his friend from the ground as Thel came up behind him.

The soldier was still breathing, but blood trickled down his throat and around his abdomen. Arsen held pressure on the wound, but he shook his head.

"He will not make it." He said softly.

Thel looked down sadly at the dying soldier. The warrior bleeding on the ground wearily lifted his hand and Arsen grabbed it firmly in his fist.

The soldier pulled Arsen close and whispered something so that only he could hear. Arsen slowly pulled back and stared at the soldier as Kalika appeared beside Thel, standing silently. Arsen nodded and stood.

He walked over to Thel and Kalika. He stopped and looked Thel in the eyes, "He would like to ask a favor of you before he dies."

The Arbiter nodded. Arsen leaned forward toward them both and whispered softly.

Thel blinked and Kalika stared at Arsen, who pulled back and stared questionably at them both. Kalika and Thel looked at each other as the rest of the Stealth team approached their friend's side.

Thel nodded to Kalika and took a step back.

Kalika looked at Arsen and nodded.

He bowed his head and also took a step back.

Kalika slowly approached the dying warrior and knelt down by his side. Two Stealth Sangheili on either side also knelt down beside their friend and began to unclasp his helmet. He struggled for air even as they removed its weight from his head. The other soldiers helped him to sit up against the wall as Kalika also removed her helmet.

"What is your name, soldier?" She asked as she set the pale golden helmet at her side on the floor.

"... Ral." He managed and closed his eyes as the others stood and stepped away.

Kalika actually smiled, "My eldest son has the same name."

Ral looked up at her, "You â€| have children?"

Kalika nodded, "Many."

Ral smiled softly, "I will soon ... be with my own." They both paused for a while, listening to his rattling breaths. He leaned his head back slowly, "It has... been an honor... then, â€| Lady 'Vadam..."

Kalika said nothing, but she leaned forward and pressed her muzzle against his.

Ral's body began to relax and he gave one last, final breath before he died.

Kalika held his gaze with her bright blue eyes until his final moment came. She could tell that he had moved on by the distant look in his warm brown eyes.

She pulled away and sat up.

Thel watched beside Arsen. This was a side of Kalika that very few got to see. These soldiers were lucky. Kalika's other side was rarely displayed in front of others, despite for Thel. Sometimes, he wished that she would show it more than the other side that so many knew her by.

"We need to move. Their leader is getting farther away." She said. The warrior had returned.

"We can't just leave him here." One of the soldiers said.

"We must." She stood and grabbed her helmet. She walked swiftly up the ramp to the exit door as she pulled the feathered helmet over her head.

Arsen hated to admit it, but he nodded his head, "Let us go."

The Arbiter still stood and looked upon Ral's limped body. He willed himself to walk away. He caught up to Arsen and asked softly, "His offspring are dead?"

"His mate died giving birth. She and the babies." Arsen said softly as they exited the room into another hallway with a door to the outside. "He is at peace now. We should not mourn his death."

"And what of his kin?"

Arsen sighed as they approached the door. "Hurry, Arbiter." Kalika appeared beside Arsen as he spoke, "Both of you will follow the heretic. We will scout the opposite side of the facility. Go."

Thel nodded and made his way for the door. As soon as it opened, powerful winds howled and slammed against the him. Thel bowed his head and ran toward one of the two Banshees on the platform. He stepped around the tail and slid his arms into the controls. The flying machine hummed to life at his touch and the screens flickered online.

Thel's Banshee lifted off from the ground, followed by

Kalika's.

"Stay close to me." Thel said into the communications.

"I cannot make any promises." Kalika slyly replied through the Banshee.

A different voice came onto their speakers, "Let us try to keep these conversations a bit more focused, please."

"It is nice to see you are still with us, Rtas." Kalika said.

'Vadum ignored her. "The heretics are mobilizing their air forces, Arbiter. Get after their leader, but watch your back. I'm sending one of our Phantoms to aid you."

Thel checked his screens, and sure enough, a large Covenant drop ship emerged from the thick clouds. Two Banshees in golden armor already flanked it, firing glowing bolts of blue plasma at the drop ship's hull. The cannons on the Covenant ship rotated and fired in return with red, hot, explosive energy bolts.

Kalika's Banshee suddenly swerved away behind him. Thel checked the rear view camera and noticed two other heretics behind them. The ships fired heat-seeking plasma bombs at Thel's Banshee. The green, hissing explosives streaked through the air and left faint trails of thick clouds behind them.

Thel yanked hard to the left, flipping his Banshee over. The ship's wings glowed bright blue and rolled through the air just as the bombs passed him -

- and trained instead on Kalika's Banshee. Thel's eyes widened as he realized his drastic mistake. Where had she come from?!

Kalika pounded hard on the boosters. Her ship lurched forward and sped in favor of the wind. The two green missiles curved to follow her around a column stretching toward the eye of the storm.

"Kalika!"

"I got it, I got it." She said dully, as if dodging bombs was a daily chore for her.

He thought that he could feel his hearts stop when the bombs were merely inches from making impact.

Kalika flipped her engines off in mid-air. The Banshee immediately began to drop and stopped glowing. Kalika released her grip on the levers and pulled her legs up. She twisted her body around so that her legs were inside of the Banshee and her torso hung out of the end. She counted silently to herself as the wind roared in her ears. She waited, calculating, waiting, counting...

The bombs fizzed out of energy and dissipated overhead. The wind had carried her all the way to the opposite side of the facility. She slammed her foot on the levers and the Banshee began to purr.

Then died again.

Kalika's eyes widened in shock. The wind was dropping her fast and her stomach felt like it was about to come out of her throat. Heretics flew overhead and circled their Banshees toward her. Green bolts of energy whirled and grew in the barrels of the enemy's launchers. The bombs fired and surged toward Kalika's falling ship.

Kalika did the only thing she could do. She pulled herself into the Banshee -

-and shoved herself out. She held her arms out as she fell through the air. She was at the wind's mercy.

Her Banshee exploded overhead in a flurry of green and blue cloud. That was all that Thel could see.

Kalika looked down. A lower ledge was outstretched beneath her and led to the middle of the lower structure of the facility. This was her only chance. She slowly angled herself head first, vertically. She tried to relax her body as much as possible as she reached out with her hand for the ledge.

She caught the ledge, alright. With a flare of her shields, her body swung around and slammed in to the wall with a "CLANG" of her armor as her wrist made a loud, "CRRK!" sound. She screamed and closed her eyes. She was lucky that her arm hadn't been torn off. She quieted herself, grunting and wincing as she clambered up onto the ledge.

She rolled onto her back and clenched her fist over her left forearm, choking down the need to cry. She instead blinked, choked, and whimpered loudly. Her wrist felt like it had been rammed into a plasma generator. The feathers on her elbows crackled with icy blue electricity. They had absorbed what damage they could. The entire left side of her body burned where she had slammed herself into the wall, and her spine stabbed her with pain when she tried to sit up.

She struggled to breathe. She managed to roll over again and rested on her forearms. Every muscle in her body screamed in protest as she willed herself to sit up. Pain suffocated her and she fell again and again. She didn't dare touch anything with her left hand. Her wrist was obviously dislocated. It would have to be set back into place, and she had no strength or leverage to do so.

She stretched her back by touching her pelvis to the ground and winced in pain again. Her spine popped, allowing air into her lungs. She rested fully on her forearms and inhaled with gaping mandibles.

"Oh gods..." She cursed as she exhaled. She rose to her knees slowly. Her shields began to regenerate around her in a shimmering wall of light blue energy and then faded away. She still clenched her forearm as she stood stiffly and walked across the ledge. On the wall that attached to the facility was a door.

Some Forerunner must be looking after her.

She tried to shake feeling back into her legs as she walked. She

bowed her head against the wind, clenching her mandibles and grunting every now and then.

The door parted as she approached. Kalika stopped in the doorway and looked up. The battle between the heretics and the drop ship still continued up above. Plasma was fired at each other and Banshees darted around the Covenant ship. She would have to meet Thel else where.

She inhaled shakily and turned around, sucking up the pain. She let her left arm hang as she armed Anari in her other hand.

She entered a dark hallway. Lights flickered on and off inside. Kalika cautiously and slowly walked down the hall. The door closed behind her, leaving her in very dim light. This was of no matter to a Sangheili. They could see easily in darker environments.

The hall stretched downward and then took a subtle right turn where Kalika could not see. Anari cast a purple glow about the hallway. If anything was around the corner, it did not stir. Black wires spat silver sparks around her feet and hung from the ceiling. Kalika pressed her back against the wall and stopped at the edge. She exhaled and peeked her eye around the corner.

Nothing moved. She sniffed the thick air as she stepped around the safety of the corner. She walked down the corridor slowly, avoiding the wires that spontaneously crackled with electricity.

The hall opened into a circular room. The ceiling was extremely tall and the floor sunk a few feet to match the circular ceiling. The walls along the sunken floor were filled with blinking holographic panels. Several of the screens showed cameras of the facility inside and the battle still continuing outside. The tall hollow column of the room stretched up to about 500 feet. Hundreds upon hundreds of heavily armored octagonal lids lined the walls entirely. A tall pole rose from the center of the room to the ceiling. Now that she looked up and observed the ceiling, it did not take up the entire floor as a ceiling should. There were empty spaces around the edges, revealing that the column was taller than it seemed. Four sections of the column's wall were missing, leading into unknown areas of the mining facility.

Kalika concluded that she was, in fact, standing at the bottom of a colossal elevator. The "lids" must be containers of some sort for something of interest of the Forerunners. Or the heretics. Whoever.

Some one's hand grabbed her around the throat and lifted her from the ground. Kalika gasped and automatically dropped Anari, reaching up with both hands to clasp onto the iron fingers around her neck. She grunted and dropped her left arm as pain bit down on her wrist.

"What are you doing here?!" A voice yelled at her. The Sangheili walked around the room, holding Kalika up as she thrashed for freedom. "Nobody is supposed to be down here!" His voice was surprisingly high for a Sangheili. "Who are you?!" His eyes were wide and crazed, like he wasn't in his right of mind.

When she didn't answer, he slammed her down on her back onto one of

the control panels.

"Opening all hatches." A woman AI's voice echoed over the speakers. The Sangheili dressed in golden heretic armor looked up in shock as the lids began to hiss.

"No!" He shouted. "We are not finished! Cancel that!"

Well, that was stupid. Kalika reached for Skira as he distracted himself. She flipped the rectangular prism, activated it, and shoved its bright blue blade through his chest. The heretic cried out and released Kalika, stumbling off of the sword and falling to his knees on the concrete floor. Kalika slid off of the control panels and walked up to the heretic. She panted heavily and snarled viciously at him. She swung Skira across his throat, beheading him and splattering purple puddles of blood on the floor. Kalika looked up as his head rolled to the floor with a "Thud!" and his armored body crumpled with a clang.

Not all of the hatches were open, but most, on all sides of the column, began to creak. There was a long moment as silence after the lids banged upward on their hinges. A familiar stench reeked from each of the empty cells within.

All at once, Flood overwhelmed the exits of the hatches. Hundreds upon hundreds shrieked and screamed as they crawled on top of each other and along the walls. Disformed creatures spat green slime as they twisted their heads around and swarmed the facility. Kalika's eyes widened.

"...Oh shit."

****Author's Notes**
>******

16) The Type-33 Guided Munitions Launcher is more commonly known as a needler. "The Needler is a Covenant projectile weapon that fires long, sharp crystalline shards that are guided until they impale a target "€" hence the "Needler" moniker. Several seconds after coming to rest in their target, the needles detonate, creating severe and in most cases fatal wounds." -HaloWiki

17) The Type-25 Directed Energy Rifle is more commonly known as a plasma rifle. "The weapon has a power output of 100-150 KV 2~3 dA, and can fire 360 to 540 rounds per minute. Unlike the Plasma Pistol, the plasma rifle is capable of semi-automatic and full automatic fire; this is thanks in part to its dual plasma collimator design." -HaloWiki

18) The Type-25 Directed Energy Pistol is more commonly known as a plasma pistol. "The weapon is powered by a battery cell and uses a superheated form of Hydrogen Fluoride gas as a source of fuel. The weapon has a power output of 100-150 KV (kilovolts) 2~3 dA, but when overcharged, the power output is 1.5 MV 2~3 dA. The Type-25 DEP is a semi-automatic weapon using a single collimator design that gives the weapon its smooth and aerodynamic, claw-like appearance." -HaloWiki

CONSORT

of the

HERETIC

Created By Cyber and Zmori

Written by Zmori

Edited by ShoopWoop17

/Access Data Logs

20 October, Year 2552

Forerunner Gas Mine, Planet Threshold

18:29 Hours

CONNECTING...

LOG 05

The Flood were coming fast both down and up the walls. Some even went through the metal and concrete.

Kalika ran to one side of the room and ducked under the control panels. She pressed her back all the way up against the wall and stayed there. She quieted her breathing as Flood touched down on the ground next to her. They sniffed the air. She could hear their guttural breathing. Their feet sloshed across the ground, and infectious pale green slime splattered on the control panels. They could smell her.

Adrenaline surged through her veins. Her breathing came rapidly as she tightened her grip on her sword. It wouldn't be long before they found her.

And then what?

She recognized the disfigured face of a Sangheili that was frozen in mid-cry on the other side of the room. Sacs built from his throat and hung off of his body. His arms were swollen into disfigured claws and his legs oozed with yellow-brown pus. The smell made Kalika want to retch.

The control panel in front of her exploded in a show of blue and red sparks. Kalika covered her head with one arm and curled her body up into a ball. When she looked up, she stared into the eyes of the contaminated Sangheili's head. Kalika immediately swung her sword downward across his face and roared angrily at the parasite. His head twisted at a strange angle with a sickening crackling sound. The parasite rotated its head all the way around behind itself, over its shoulder, and shrieked at her after a long series of cracking and popping noises. Kalika wrinkled her muzzle in disgust and swung her sword again to dismember his head.

She pulled her foot away from the jaws of a similar parasite. A

smaller Flood crawled along the ground and wobbled on its tentacle legs toward her head.

She needed to move or she would be pinned down against the wall. She smashed the smaller Flood with the flat of her sword against the floor and kicked the parasite trying to grab her leg, all the while yelling, "I will NOT die down here!"

She used the kick to help her shove herself up. She shifted Skira to one thumb and index finger, and then grabbed the edge of the dismantled control panel above her to pull herself up. She sat up, turning her head to watch for her next opponent. The crawling parasites hissed at her and began to wobble rapidly toward her position.

She began to stand when, suddenly, a wave of three Flood spores leaped up from the ground toward her face. She bent her body back over the panels as she swung her blue blade through the air. All three of the parasites collapsed on the panels above her head. Kalika looked up.

And just in time, too. A large, ugly, three-fingered fist came surging toward her head. She rolled over just as a massive parasite swung his fist through the control panels in a flurry of sparks, leaving a dent in the concrete floor. She stood up off of her belly, checking her back before confronting this new enemy. The little parasites were...

...running away? Kalika blinked in confusion and turned around. The Flood before her had a humongous sac expanding rapidly above its head. Kalika ducked underneath what remained of the panels just as it exploded. Green remains splattered on the walls above her and stained her armor on the right side of her arm and helmet. She turned on her heels and made a wide defensive stroke of her sword before her, a growl rippling through her throat as her lips curled to bare her teeth ferally.

But there was no enemy to taste her blade. The parasites were crawling back up the walls and hissing. Kalika looked around herself and frowned in confusion. There was nothing behind her. She checked the ground twice. She cautiously made her way back from where she had come from.

Tap... tap... tap...

Her boots clicked on the ground softly and echoed eerily in the silence. There were no more creatures crawling along the walls... in fact, there was no one. A moan croaked from the elevator above her, causing her to look up in alarm as a light green mist frothed forth from vents.

A parasite screamed far off in the distance, followed by a recognizable Sangheili's cry. Kalika clipped Skira quickly to her left thigh and reached for her second sword that was still fizzling on the ground. She breathed rapidly, but quietly so that she could hear the Flood banging against the walls and tearing through the wiring systems in their desperation to find living hosts.

Kalika's mandibles tightened. Her wrist felt like it was on fire. She pressed her back up against the wall beside the dark entrance. She

looked to her left where more screaming echoed down the tall shaft, and then to her right where a pair of foaming jaws parted before her face.

She cried out in alarm and stumbled backward, swinging her sword at the parasite grabbing for her with dark claws. The Flood roared and pounced, slamming her to the ground in its massive hand. Kalika held her sword up as the infected Sangheili fell down on top of her. The blade bit through its neck and its body sagged on her sword. Kalika turned her head away as green fluids burst from its pores along its severed neck. She kicked into its gut to get it off of her, but the massive thing refused to budge.

Kalika's outcry finished reverberating about the hall.

"...Kalika?!" A voice of desperation called from above, followed by a variation of plasma pistols being fired and a scream from a parasite.

Kalika looked up at the floor of the elevator above her. Her hearts nearly sagged with relief at the sound of Thel's voice. She grunted and wrestled with the parasite's corpse. She rolled and threw it off of herself. She sat up and called back, hiding her emotion with a heavy tone, "I'm here!"

Flood began to come around the walls again, clawing at the metal and climbing upward. Kalika stood as the new enemy advanced toward her.

"Can you descend the elevator?" The Arbiter yelled over the edge.

Kalika hissed at the large parasite lumbering toward her, crouching down and tilting her sword outward. "I'm a little-" The Flood charged and swiped at her with a writhing tentacle. Kalika ducked, stepped behind her right foot, and swung her sword toward its shoulder. "-BUSY!"

The Flood's arm fell to the ground in a puddle of fluid. Kalika swung again across its chest, forcing the parasite to scream and collapse to the floor. Kalika stepped down hard on its back, much to her disgust as contaminated fluids seeped from flaps on its translucent green skin. She thrust her plasma blade into its lower back, forcing the last cry of the Flood out in a series of guttural sputters.

Arsen fought by the Arbiter's side, firing his plasma rifle at the parasites crawling around on the floor. "How is she alive?! Her Banshee exploded!" He yelled, dodging to the side as a heretic infested lunged for him.

Thel didn't seem to hear him. The only part that he seemed to recognize was that his wife was still alive. He fired his carbine at the parasites leaping from the tiers of the walls of the column the elevator resided in. They landed before him, glaring and bellowing. Thel moved in, throwing his empty weapon to the ground and wielding his energy sword. A Flood leaped up into the air as Thel charged. The Arbiter kicked off of the ground, twisting his waist and pulling his sword back. The parasite extended its claw, but its face was suddenly impaled by the Arbiter's sword. Thel landed and fell to one knee,

slamming the Flood's limp body onto the ground. He looked up and stared at the numerous Flood lining up on the beams.

"Kalika!" He yelled.

"I am working on it!" She called back irritably as she shoved her foot into a parasite's face. Kalika turned toward what looked like the motor control panels. Multiple buttons flashed red, while others blinked blue. The many different colors were distracting.

"Eject... gas control... cameras..." Kalika mumbled as she searched for some kind of elevation control. She frowned at the next button.

"What in the name of the gods is 'disco mode'?"

"Now would be most favorable!" Thel called. His back was bent over the edge and his elbow was up to push away a growling parasite with his forearm. The Flood screamed and snapped at his face as Arsen struggled with multiple small parasites trying to pin him to the ground.

"Here!" Kalika slammed down hard on a purple button.

"Identification required." A woman's voice said. Kalika's jaws spread in disbelief as a panel blocked the screen with the same message and a scanner clicked below the panel.

She groaned and looked around the room. The stupid heretic that had slammed her on the control panels had been infested with the Flood. He was long gone. Small spores started to gather around the entrance.

"KALIKA!"

"ALRIGHT!" Kalika shouted and spun around. She rubbed the back of her glove across her bloodied teeth. Most of the blood was already dry, but the upper layer was still moist and collected on her suit. She smeared the blood on the scanner at the bottom of the panel. The tray clicked and folded underneath the screen.

"Welcome, Lieutenant Thos 'Toronee." The computer spoke monotonously. Kalika tilted her head at the familiar name. Wasn't that a councilor's state name?

She pressed the button again.

The elevator began to whirl and shudder as the central column began to twist. Kalika spun around and wielded her sword to take on the infectious Flood.

Anari sputtered and flickered off. Kalika stared at the dribbling plasma hilt. She looked up and swatted away a small Flood spore. Four others leaped up to replace the one, gurgling and grabbing for her with their tentacles.

Thel wavered in his stance as the elevator began to descend. He and Arsen panted heavily, looking at each other to make sure they had not been infected. The one Unggoy with them fought admirably. He, too, wobbled as the elevator carried them down further into the dark

shaft.

Thel had to grab onto a pillar when the elevator suddenly stopped. His cheeks tugged down in the equivalent of a Sangheili frown, "What is going on?" He called over the edge.

Kalika threw down the last parasite with a satisfying "pop" and hurried back over to the red flashing screen. Her pupils narrowed and her lip curled in irritation, "Today is not my day."

The blaring screen read, "Malfunction" in circular Forerunner characteristics. Kalika couldn't translate as well as Arsen could, but she had a pretty good idea of what it meant. She sighed as she studied the diagram of the elevator that the screens provided, "The elevator is jammed!" She yelled. The shafts of the central column were flashing red and live camera feed was provided in the bottom corner.

"Initiating automatic repairs." The computer purred. Kalika looked down at the progress bar at the bottom that read, "Estimated Time: 2 days, 5 hours, 38 minutes, 6 seconds."

"We don't have two days." Kalika growled. Suddenly, the time changed again, "5 minutes, 7 seconds." She tilted her head in confusion. It jumped again, "1 week, 6 days, 3 hours, 7 minutes, 5 seconds."

Kalika groaned at the screen, "You are completely unreliable." She looked up at the central column where the Flood was starting to collect. Strange pore-like infectious Flood started to grow across the pillar, digging its tentacles into the shafts and disabling it from moving. That would cause a problem.

She would use her ranged weapon, but Anari had just run out of plasma. She clipped the hilt to her thigh and reached for Skira instead. She looked up again. She could throw a grenade, but if the Flood had gotten past the shafts, the inner structure would be damaged, taking the entire elevator down with the others on it.

It was a quick way of getting them down, but she preferred them all alive. She would have to remove the Flood herself. The question was how was she going to get up there? She considered climbing the ledges, but then she remembered that her dislocated wrist would give her trouble. She could make the climb with one arm, but how would she protect herself from the parasites? The situation was really quite hopeless.

Kalika growled in aggravation and shoved the bottom of her boot against the base of the central column. The metal shook and vibrated as the shafts creaked under the weight. Kalika was just about to turn away, but she stopped and looked back at the bottom of the column. She paused for a moment as her mind began to calculate her chances of surviving something absolutely crazy.

"Thel!" She called. The Flood began to come around the corners again. Three large parasites with swollen sacs rising from their backs flickered multiple tentacles at her as they waddled across the concrete. There could have been more than twenty smaller infectious parasites wobbling on their tentacles for legs.

Thel tore his sword out of a Flood's forehead and kicked it hard onto the ground. "What?!" He shouted as he swerved around to swing his sword at a larger parasite.

"Kick the central pillar!" He heard her say. Her voice echoed to ensure that he had heard her correctly. The head of the parasite before him fell to the ground, followed shortly by the rest of its body. Arsen spun around and aimed both of his rifles at the Flood trying to board the elevator.

"Did she just say to kick the pillar?" He inquired with a furrow of his eye-ridges.

Thel turned around and observed the thick octagonal pillar rising from the center of the elevator, and supporting a second platform.

"Arsen!" Kalika grabbed a plasma grenade from her belt and threw it at the mass of parasites crawling toward her.

"What is it, female?" Arsen took a couple of steps back as a large Flood-Sangheili landed in front of him, surprised that she remembered his name.

"This 'female' has a name." Kalika rose her blue blade up to swat away the leaping parasites.

"Not yet, she doesn't." Arsen growled. He ducked under a Flood's arm and fell to one knee. He aimed his gun as the parasite whirled around to swing its large claws at him, but Arsen's rifle sparked first and fired blazing bolts of blue plasma into its face. The parasite shrieked and twisted its head away, but it, too, crumpled to the ground.

Arsen looked up at the Arbiter, who was giving him of a look of disapproval. Arsen tilted his head in confusion, but Thel looked away and started to lift his left leg up. The Arbiter pounded his heavy boot against the pillar, rattling the metal and sending vibrations throughout the central column. He continued to slam the bottom of his foot against the base of the pillar as Kalika whirled around, ignoring the parasites closing in on her. She also leaned back, shoving her armored boot against the bottom of the pillar.

"Throw down a gun to me!" She yelled as the Flood hugging the mid-pillar hissed in agitation. It was trying to grow, feeding on the smaller parasites crawling along the beams of the walls. The vibrations caused disturbance on its grasping tentacles and it started to slide ever so slowly down the pillar. The elevator began to whir as its shafts began to clack.

Kalika looked up as a plasma pistol slid off of the edge of the elevator. She ducked out of the way of the three explosive parasites behind her and dove toward the pistol. She clipped her sword, rolled over her shoulder, rose up onto one knee, and grabbed the pistol from the air by its muzzle. She tossed it up to flip it over, pulling her injured wrist behind her back. She squeezed the trigger and spun on her knee. The gun hummed and a green glow grew brighter at its barrel, reflecting off of her fallow gold armor. She fired her weapon at the parasites waddling toward her, her arms jerking with each rapid shot. The Flood continued to advance on her even as the plasma

jolted their bodies.

Arsen had to cover the Arbiter as he continued to kick the pillar. He stood with his back against Thel's with both of his rifles pointing at either side of him.

"Forty years of service, and never have I endured a mission as ridiculous as this!" Arsen shouted as he spun around to join Thel in kicking the pillar. He had no idea why they were doing it, or any clue why he was trusting the female, but he obeyed nonetheless.

"This is only the beginning." Thel panted as he paused for a moment. They both pounded their boots at the same time on the pillar while, down below, Kalika backed away from the Flood advancing on her. None of them seemed affected by the plasma searing their slick flesh. They just kept coming.

Kalika decided to move on to a different method. She aimed her gun above her head toward the pale yellow parasite hugging the pillar. She squeezed the trigger and held it. The gun began to vibrate and buzz loudly as plasma collected at its tip. Heat built up in the handle and began to burn her hand even through the suit. She fired the powered shot up at the giant parasite with a large kick-back. As the neon green bolt streaked through the air in an electric cloud of plasma, Kalika changed her position to the opposite side of the pillar and began to kick the pillar again. She timed her kicks to meet Thel's and Arsen's.

The pale parasite hissed again as the vibrations loosened its sticky tentacles. When the plasma burned its sensitive wrinkly hide, the Flood jerked its tentacles away. Too late, the parasite tried to regain its grip. The pillar was wracked again and with a shudder, the large parasite began to fall. Kalika stopped kicking and immediately stumbled backward. The three explosive Flood almost had her. Their sacs were translucent and straining with pressure. They gurgled and continued to waddle toward her.

The Flood were intelligent. They learned rapidly through the mistakes of their hosts. The three parasites had her pinned to the wall. One advanced slowly in front of her as the other two blocked off her left and right sides.

A giant shadow loomed above them for a split second. The next thing she knew, the giant Flood smashed the three smaller parasites under its massive frame. The elevator began to whirl again and the shafts began to creak. Thel and Arsen stopped kicking and spun around, back to back again as the elevator began to descend.

"We have a problem." Kalika called up.

Arsen growled in irritation, "Because we did not have one before?!"

Kalika stared at the destroyed control panels underneath the large Flood's tentacles, "Not compared to this."

"Security alert. Activating defensive mechanisms." The distorted woman's voice said.

The elevator jerked to a stop again. Then it began to turn and twist.

"You are turning it in circles!" Arsen yelled.

"I am not turning anything!" Kalika roared back.

Arsen snorted and glared up at the parasites crawling and running across the beams to get to them. He looked around the elevator and walked up to the second level. "...Where is Yummee?"

The Arbiter assumed that he was referring to the Grunt that was with them previously. "...Yummee?" He called, also looking for the little Unggoy and fearing the worst.

Kalika looked up in confusion. "...Did you not eat before we came here?"

Thel exhaled heavily and rebalanced himself when the elevator thankfully stopped spinning. A parasite leaped at Arsen, shrieking and swinging its black tentacles at his face. Arsen stepped forward and shoved the bottom of his boot into the Flood's face. "Worthless CUR!" He spat as he watched the parasite fall to the ground below.

Kalika ducked out of the way as the body slammed into the panel beside her. She looked up at Arsen, "Please dispose of parasites responsibly."

"Ah! Responsibility! Has this word been newly introduced into your vocabulary?" Arsen said as he backed up to take on the next enemy.

"Come down here, and I will introduce you to my fist!" She growled as she stepped up on to the flatter, pale parasite.

"Both of you!" Thel snapped, "Focus!"

Bright orange beams of plasma crackled at Arsen's feet and seared the ground. Arsen ducked away and aimed both of his guns at the Sentinel barreling toward him. The sentinel's guns began to scream to life as its brethren flew downward.

"What is wrong with the system?" Arsen yelled as he fired his guns at the flying machines. "I've never seen a Forerunner technology so unpredictable before!"

"The heretics were tampering with the wires and the controls before I came here." Kalika replied as she aimed the pistol up into the air. Sentinels zoomed toward her and warmed up their weapons. Kalika began to back up, keeping her weapon trained on the flying Sentinels.

"...Thel?"

The Arbiter whirled around, swinging his sword through the middle of a parasite's waist completely. "Yes?" He inquired loudly while trying to not sound frustrated by his current situation. It was a difficult task that he had mastered over the years.

"Do you remember that old doarmir cloak you left behind?" She said as she dodged out of the way of lasers and fired her pistol.

Thel immediately stopped and turned his head. She was referring to the cloak that he had made when he was a much younger Sangheili. The cloak was made of doarmir fur and it served as a reminder to him to remain weary and cautious of his actions. After his incident and having to dishonorably and secretly visit a doctor, his cloak had become a symbol of recognition for his mistakes.

"I may have... temporarily misplaced it."

"You LOST it?!"

Kalika cringed her shoulders upward slightly and tilted her head, "I would not say 'lost', but-"

"Why are you bringing this up now?!" The Arbiter stormed forward and swung his sword across a parasite's torso.

"Because-" Kalika started, but she leaped out of the way of a crashing Sentinel, falling on to one hand on the dead Flood's corpse. She pulled her hand away from the pale parasite's rotting hide and wrinkled her nose slightly as foul-smelling slime stretched from her gloves. She stood up and shook her hand, a gun still clasped in her thumbs, "-I would rather have you take your anger out on the enemy than on me."

Thel whirled around and shoved the tips of his sword through a parasite's head. He shoved it away, thrusting its body against the pillar. "We are having a VERY long conversation when we return home!"

Kalika sighed tiredly.

The elevator jerked and whirred again, descending closer to Kalika. They didn't have to yell as loud to understand each other now. Thel sighed and placed his palm over his muzzle as the elevator clicked and continued downward.

He didn't feel like himself. Who was this angry and impatient person that had been brought out of him? He knew exactly what the answer was, but he didn't think that it would be this dramatic.

Twenty seven years of pent up anger and frustration was being unleashed onto each other. Twenty seven years of non-stop fighting, not knowing if he would ever see home again, constant concern for being what he was supposed to be, anger at the way things were with his keep and his being here, and most of all, anger at himself had been eating away at him from the inside. He had wondered why Kalika had been encouraging his irritable behavior ever since she came here.

He pulled his hand away from his snout. Kalika sometimes did things that not even he could explain. It would cause doubt in the Prophet's eyes if he could not contain and control himself. She was doing a dangerous thing.

Everything she was doing, and had done, now that he thought about it, was a dangerous thing. What was she thinking? He wasn't too concerned

with the combat and the physical danger. She knew how to take care of herself.

Most of the time.

But that wasn't the point. There were rules and customs that even her rebellious self must submit to.

She could fight, he would not deny her that. But what power would she have when they returned to High Charity? The Prophets were merciful in keeping her presence a secret, though he would have preferred to have been notified ahead of time of her arrival. No one outside of Vadam was supposed to know that he even had a mate. He wanted to keep it that way, not only to keep her safe, but to avoid quarrels with the other males. Knowing Kalika, he doubted that she would stay cooped up in his chambers for their entire stay there.

He was glad to see her, but there was too much at stake. The only thing that was protecting her from execution was her title and the fact that she was his consort.

Kalika never did anything without having a good, solid reason. That he knew. There must be something more to her purpose here. He was determined to figure out what it was when they returned from this mission, if they did at all.

He was lurched back into the present moment when the elevator began to spin again. Arsen grabbed onto a crate to steady himself. "Stop turning the elevator, woman!"

"I have no control over the elevator!" She yelled scathingly.

Arsen stood up, "...Then who is controlling the elevator?"

Kalika turned her head and sniffed the air. A different scent lightly tinged the acrid smell of the room. She followed the intensity of the scent, stepping over bodies and debris. She ducked her head under one of the panels and pulled aside a destroyed screen. An Unggoy looked up at her with beady, black eyes and warbled. Kalika frowned and narrowed her pupils at the wires entangled in his large hands.

"...I think I found your Grunt." She called and stood up as more Flood rounded the corners of the open walls. Sentinels hovered in the air, training their weapons on her.

"Yummee?" Arsen called.

"Yummee is here, sir." The Unggoy called weakly.

Kalika turned around again.

"Damn it, Yummee! Why are you down there?!" Arsen roared.

Kalika's face darkened into a disconsolate expression, "His legs are missing."

Yummee warbled again up at her. Then he looked down at the wires in his hands and began to connect a few selected into the panels and ports. The elevator stopped spinning.

Kalika forced herself to look away and aimed her gun again. "He is working on getting you down. I will cover him for how ever long he needs."

Arsen was still staring in shock at whatever happened to be in front of him, in this case, the pillar. That little Grunt had been on his team for as long as he could remember. He was just a Grunt, but...

"Soldier!" Thel shouted.

Arsen spun around and shoved his rifle up into a parasite's mouth between its writhing tentacles. He roared indignantly, "YOUR DEATH IS AT HAND!" and filled its head full with blue plasma. He shoved the parasite off of the elevator, releasing an angry battle cry from his throat.

Kalika stood up on the pale parasite's body again, directing the attention away from Yummee and onto herself. She fired her pistol at the Sentinel directly above her head. Just as it exploded, she was tackled around the waist and slammed down hard into the ground. She cried out in pain when her dislocated wrist reacted and twisted to catch herself. She gasped for breath and jabbed the pistol into the infected Sangheili's head, falling onto her back and dropping her wrist beside her, squeezing the trigger repeatedly and pumping green plasma into its eye socket. She lay on her back with the dead parasite laying on top of her. Kalika winced and lifted her arm, firing at the Sentinels above her.

Thel looked up at the sound of Kalika's outcry. That wasn't the first time.

"What is wrong?" He called, stepping beside Arsen and swinging his sword upward to knock a Flood away from him.

Kalika grunted and wriggled out from underneath the parasite's body. "My wrist is dislocated."

She said it like dislocating joints was a regular thing for her. Thel exhaled sharply and looked over the edge of the elevator. A thick green fog hid the bottom floor, but he could see down far enough to notice a faint haze of bluelight- a door several levels down.

He hated not being able to do anything when he was needed. "As soon as we get down, I will assist you."

Kalika's cheeks tugged upward in a Sangheili smile. Her husband was always trying to play the hero, even when he couldn't help himself. She looked up and her entire body immediately stiffened.

She was entirely surrounded by Flood, and they were closing in fast. She was still pinned underneath the parasite's body by the legs. She aimed her gun and bared her fangs, roaring in defiance as at least five tall parasites loomed over her.

A bright blue light streaked across the air and stuck one of the parasites in the head. Kalika curled up and closed her eyes, protecting her head with her healthy arm. The plasma grenade made a high pitched wail and exploded.

The Flood were thrown back and lay still on the floor. Kalika panted heavily and pulled her legs out from under the parasite's body. She bowed her head, "Thank you, Yummee."

The Unggoy warbled and went back to work on the wires. The Arbiter leaned over the wall and aimed down at the faint shadows of the Sentinels, firing his carbine each time with a kick back.

The elevator lurched and began to descend again. Yummee had finished his work. Kalika turned her head and looked over at the appalling sight of him. He was holding many wires together at the tips, and his arms were vibrating with the voltage. It was a terrible thing to watch. Bright blue blood pooled beneath his dismembered waist and speckled his arms.

Finally, his little body could take no more. The Unggoy dropped the wires and the elevator stopped moving. He was completely motionless and still. Kalika stared down at him for a while before looking up, "That is as far as he can take you."

Arsen understood and nodded his head toward the Arbiter. Thel examined Arsen's expression, but it was unreadable and downcast. The Arbiter turned away and looked around on the walls. Yummee had taken them down far enough to access the open door that he had seen. "Can you meet us?"

"I can try." Kalika looked around the walls where the rest of the Flood had gone. She gave one last look to Yummee. She wondered if he would ever be remembered by others, for she had never seen such honorable actions come from an Unggoy before. Or would he be forever erased from all memory like she?

Kalika looked away and walked up to one of the panels that had not yet been demolished. She climbed on top of it and grabbed the edge of the wall with the purple gun still in hand. She stared into the darkness and the gray fog unfurling along the silver floor.

Thel and Arsen ran down a long hallway. Green slime and bodies littered the metal floor. The air was warm and rank with the smell of blood mixed with the horrible stench of the parasite. Their foot falls echoed down the corridor that led to a dead end. A single door parted for them on the left with a hiss.

Another long hallway opened up, but this one had a glass wall around the inside of it. The hall circled around and connected at the ends. The Arbiter cautiously entered, sniffing the air and stepping toward the glass. Arsen was constantly looking behind him or above him, keeping both of his rifles aimed wherever his eyes looked.

Through the glass, a large room opened up. It was tall and sunk beneath their floor. Down below, three platforms were spread equally across the floor. Holographic screens floated above control panels on the platforms, though they had already been ravaged by the Flood.

Thel didn't see any doors or elevators going down. They were only in the observation hall of whatever that room was supposed to be. Thel rammed his carbine into the dirty glass window, shattering it in a single blow. Arsen arched an eye ridge as the Arbiter jumped through the glass and landed with a loud thud, crackling and shuffling the

broken glass.

Flood spores slid along the ground and hissed in irritation at the Arbiter's presence. Thel turned and aimed the thin barrel at the small parasites as Arsen landed behind him.

Kalika's boots made contact with the metal floor, sending a ringing sound through out the dark hall. Openings in the walls led to more halls, which spider-webbed into other rooms and even more halls. Kalika slowly walked down the large corridor. Lights flickered on and off above her head and on the floor, casting flickering shadows and distracting her peripheral vision. Her eyes couldn't focus on near complete darkness to brightness so rapidly. She continued to mistake her shadows for approaching enemies, and would aim her gun at evasive ghosts.

A Flood bellowed in the hall ahead of her. She flinched and aimed her gun at the moving shadows across the walls. She started to walk forward, but her boots splashed into what seemed to be water. Kalika frowned and looked down. It had a sour and sickening smell. She pulled her feet out of the pools of clear liquid and stepped around it. She looked up and saw a tall parasite at the end of the corridor. Kalika immediately aimed her gun and pulled the trigger. The lights flickered again. When they turned back on, the parasite was half way across the hall. Kalika held the trigger down and the gun began to vibrate as green plasma fueled its tips. The lights turned off again, but for a split second, the parasite's face was lit up with the gun's green light. The disfigured Sangheili's head was twisted at a strange angle and one of its eyes was much too big for its socket.

Kalika fired the pistol, and in a flash of green, the lights turned back on, and the parasite lay collapsed by her feet. Kalika reminded herself to breathe and stepped over the body. She entered the narrow hall that the parasite had come from.

The hall was dark, and thankfully had no flickering lights. Shadows still danced across the floors and the walls from the hallway behind her. She walked swiftly down the skinny hallway and her hearts pounded erratically in her inner ears.

Kalika could do prisons, fight the terrors of space, lead an entire keep, stare the Prophets in the eye, but the one thing she could not do was tight spaces. Having a slight claustrophobia was not the most favorable trait for a Sangheili warrior.

The walls were inches away from her shoulder guards. Kalika's jaws were clamped together tightly and her body was stiff as she stormed down the hall. She ignored the strange, swelling, red and green Flood environment growing on the walls and along the floors. She stepped on a few swollen bubbles, squishing them and spewing green fluid across the ground. She continued walking, ducking under broken pipes and stepping carefully over wires. This must have been some kind of plumbing or electrical control room.

The hall finally opened, much to Kalika's relief, into a much shorter, yet wider wall. Two doors were on either side of the hall, both with red lights to indicate that they were locked. She stepped inside and looked around. It was pretty empty and dismal... and it was a dead end. The gray walls returned warped reflections of herself and the dark tiled floor was slightly cleaner than the evolving

hallway behind her. She turned around to go back, but instead of the narrow, Flood infested hallway, a clean wall had noiselessly taken its place. Kalika frowned and stepped back, looking around the room again. She backed up against one of the doors, confused and trying to figure out what was going on. She readied the pistol and pointed it upwards-

The door she leaned on suddenly banged loudly and Kalika was shoved off of it. She spun around and aimed the pistol, panting harshly and growling in warning to whatever was coming.

Thel frowned and put the side of his head up against the door, "...Hello?"

She couldn't understand what was said, but she heard something and also pressed the side of her head against the door. She knocked softly, trying to hear whatever the sound was again.

Thel returned the knock and pulled himself away to look around the door. There was no control panel to open it with. Kalika heard a bang behind her. She turned her head as the door opposite of her opened, and she immediately froze in place.

Thel turned away to ready himself against the coming parasites. The door started to bang rapidly behind him, startling not only himself, but Arsen as well. Arsen turned his head and stared at the door, "Is it her?"

Thel nodded and approached the door cautiously. It stopped banging and a silence filled the room. Arsen aimed his rifles at the approaching Flood spores. A high pitched, muffled squeal came from the other side of the door, followed shortly by a loud boom.

"That was a plasma grenade." Thel said and placed his hand on the door, searching desperately for some kind of way to open it.

Arsen exhaled heavily. He couldn't understand it. How could some one so high of ranking be so concerned about some one so inconsiderate and lowly as she was? It frustrated the hell out of him. Supposedly, they were married, though they bit each others heads off any chance that they were given it.

Thel drew his energy sword and shoved it into the crack of the door on the left. Kalika flinched when two spokes of sharp, burning plasma jutted out of the door beside her. She looked up as a massive wave of Flood advanced toward her. The opposite door revealed a completely infested and overrun room of parasites.

Thel raked his sword back and forth across the crevice of the door as Arsen fired his guns at the parasites on their side of the door. The sword hissed and spat as it struggled to cut its sharp edge through the thick black metal. He shoved the sword through to the middle of the door, and then down again. The door creaked as a jagged piece of it fell heavily to the ground toward Kalika's side. Arsen turned around, keeping his rifles trained on the battlefield ahead of him. His jaws flared in disbelief, "You must be joking."

Kalika leaped over the door and ran past Arsen, "Nope."

Flood charged past the door and bellowed loudly. The trio fell back

to the platforms, taking to higher ground. Arsen covered them both with his rifles, stepping back as infected heretics advanced upon him. Several were still trying to mutate. They spat pale green slime onto the floor as the parasites consumed their hosts. A thick sickening brown covering grew across the Sangheili's hides, and then continued to grow, layer by slick layer, twisting ligaments and forcing their faces into disfigured, intense expressions until they were transformed into the abominations of the Flood.

Kalika's plasma pistol had run out in that previous room. Her glove still felt the heat from just the handle of the smaller purple gun. Her other hand was tense and unusable. She crouched down in the middle of the platform, pulling on her black detachable glove and resting on one knee. Her wrist was swollen slightly and the dislocated joint made a bump in her skin where the bone stuck up at a strange angle.

"Soldier, cover us." The Arbiter commanded and put away his sword. He turned away from the edge of the platform as the black armored Stealth soldier stepped back, halting his shooting to allow his rifles to cool down.

Thel crouched down in front of Kalika, his pupils narrowed in observation, his eye-ridges pulled forward slightly and his muzzle wrinkled in concentration. She took on a similar expression, but looked up at him instead as he placed his hand gently under hers. His other hand touched, but did not apply pressure, and curled around the dislocated joint. He looked up after making sure that his hands were properly placed. This wasn't the first time he had had to reset a dislocated joint. They stared at each other for the briefest moment. Kalika's jaws clenched tightly as she inhaled shakily.

"Are you ready?" asked the Arbiter.

"Just get it over w-"

A loud crack sounded from her wrist as Thel shoved the joint back into place. Kalika jerked her head forward and cried out suddenly, then stifled her outcries by clamping her lower jaws inward and exhaling in short, quick outbursts. Thel kept pressure on the wrist to discourage any more swelling and his eye expressions grew more intense in concern. His armored mandibles clenched slightly as Kalika's breathing resettled. She looked up at him again and her expression hardened, "Help him. I can do the rest."

Thel stared at her for a while longer before nodding and standing, reloading his carbine and walking toward the opposite end of the platform. Kalika used her other hand to apply pressure to her wrist as she pushed herself back against the base of the control panels. She lowered her muzzle and pulled her mandibles outward slightly. The tip of her soft red-violet tongue emerged as she pulled her wrist up directly beneath her jaws. She licked the swollen skin swiftly in very few strokes, keeping her eyes trained on the battle field behind the blue holograph screens.

Sangheili had learned to evolve without the use of doctors and medicine, and for minor wounds such as this, their saliva is very able to better heal small cuts and wounds.

Arsen's rifle clicked and hissed, signifying that it was empty. The

other followed shortly after. The Stealth soldier growled and threw down his useless guns with a clatter. The Flood before him roared and charged at Arsen as he drew his silvery blue energy sword with a fit of purple clouds and sparks spitting from its silver hilt. Arsen began to step down from the platform, roaring a challenge as he swept his sword through the enemy. The Arbiter stayed on the platform with Kalika and held his carbine up to his eye, aiming at the Flood advancing on Arsen from behind. Kalika pulled her glove back on and winced softly as the suit tightened and adjusted to her wrist.

She rose off of her knee and began to slowly and painfully rotate the joint. The bone adjusted again with several more sickening cracks, forcing the last angles in their correct places. It would be a while before the nerves and muscle completely healed, but it was painfully usable for now. Kalika managed to keep a straight face despite the fact that her wrist felt like it had been beaten a thousand times with a gravity hammer. All of her weapons were spent. Both of her swords had run out of plasma, and the pistol was useless...

She took that back. She pulled the empty weapon from its clasp beside her waist and contemplated the idea in her head.

Thel stopped firing the carbine. It had generated too much heat in his hands and refused to produce any fixated plasma. The Arbiter looked up into the battlefield as he opened the carbine's chamber to reload and cool it off. Flood still came through the doors in small groups of one or two infected heretics with smaller parasites scattering around their feet. Arsen fought off two at a time with long strokes of his sword. The next thing he knew, Kalika ran past him, leaped off of the platform, and into the mob of Flood with an empty plasma rifle.

"Are you CRAZY?!" Thel blurted with a tinge of anger quivering his deep voice.

"Are you truly asking me that?" She growled. She took a low stance, holding her left arm behind her back like she did when she was training the young. The pistol was in her right arm and was being held backwards by the handle. She swung rapidly at a tall parasite's head, using the gun like a club.

It was such a simple sentence. It could have been harmless, but something finally snapped within the Arbiter. He began to step down from the platform as he roared, "What happened to you, Kalika?!" He shoved the chamber closed with a click and advanced on the surrounding enemies.

Kalika looked up in surprise, "What are you talking about?" She yelled as she rammed the two ends of the pistol into a parasite's chest with a popping noise. She shoved again, thrusting the Flood onto the ground. She fell to one knee to duck under a Flood's swinging arm and kicked the parasite hard in its shin.

"What happened to the woman who lived and breathed honor?!" Thel shouted as he fired his carbine repeatedly at the coming parasites. They crumpled before his feet as Arsen spun around, swinging his sword in swift, long, expert strokes. "Who exemplified respect and dignity?!" His carbine clicked and the meter was empty. He swung the bottom of the long gun around and swatted a parasite in its face, crushing its host's skull and sending it flying into the ground. "Who

stood by my side through everything and anything?!" He threw the heavy gun horizontally into a Flood's chest and drew his sword as the parasite fell back onto the ground. "Who endured the righteous path-" He knelt down as he rolled his shoulder back and then shoved his sword into the fallen parasite's chest. "-and led an entire keep in the absence of its Kaidon?!" He jerked his sword out of the Flood's body and growled at the smaller spores crawling toward them. "What happened to the woman I love?!"

Kalika's jaws clenched at that last sentence and did not mistake his lack of a past-tense on the word "love". He wasn't just talking about now. He was referring to way before the war was ever even contemplated. She swung around and elbowed an opponent hard in his head. It was her turn.

"And what happened to the soldier who fought for what he believed was right, not blindly for the cause of others?!" She roared as she dug the pistol's points again and again into a parasite's face. "Who saw only the best even in the most corrupt of people?!" The parasite rotated its arm and swung down hard as Kalika rose the pistol up to protect herself. Its claws raked through the top half of the pistol as Kalika shifted her grip and grabbed the bottom half. The last green inklings of plasma dripped from the opened handle of her half of the gun. She held the opposite end and rammed the jagged edge into its head. The plasma burned into its skull and it instantly became inanimate, collapsing to the ground as Kalika yanked the half of the pistol out of its head. "Who loved so willingly that he would endanger his life and do what ever it took to get home?!" She stepped forward and hissed at the next mob of Flood advancing from the door. She stormed across the battlefield to meet the enemy, "Who treasured every waking moment of his life; who had hope no matter how dark everything seemed?!"

Arsen took on the one parasite on the right as Thel rounded on the one on the left. Kalika took the middle as Arsen swung his sword through the parasite's torso.

Thel waited for his opponent to attack first, and said with a final bellow, "WAR HAPPENED!" He lunged his sword through the charging Flood's throat and slammed it down hard into the ground as Kalika shoved the broken pistol deep into a parasite's hearts. She leaned back and kicked the jagged piece deeper into its body to ensure that the plasma would burn its insides. Thel tore his sword brutally out of the Flood's throat as the last opponent collapsed to the ground.

The Arbiter stood and looked up at his wife. They were both panting heavily and they were both giving each other a look that expressed a feeling that they very similarly shared.

They were both just tired. The last twenty-seven years couldn't have been friendly to her either. Leading and managing an entire keep wasn't the easiest thing, and neither was being a mother, especially when she was without the support of her husband. For twenty-seven years, they had both contained themselves. Their few visits were brief and very little words were ever spoken because there wasn't much to say.

Kalika gave him such a distraught and weary sigh as she turned away that Thel finally understood. She was trying to help him.

Her strange, obnoxious behavior suddenly made sense.

Thel began to follow after her. She was forcibly pulling his frustrations and anger out of him, whether he liked it or not. He was unconsciously relieving everything that he had kept so pent up tightly within himself for all of those long years. This angry and impatient warrior wasn't Thel 'Vadamee. It was the monster that he had created and contained within himself for so long. He hadn't realized that it had gotten this bad.

Kalika understood him far too well, just as he understood her...

...most of the time.

Arsen stepped up to the larger platform, feeling slightly awkward, and looked over the screens. He swiped his fingers across the windows and tapped at the buttons as he spoke, "Arbiter, you may go ahead. I will stay and assist you from these controls." A door on the far right of the room suddenly beeped and pulled its panels into the walls. "Commander 'Vadumee should have reinforcements ready on the other side of that room where they are pursuing the heretic's leader."

Thel nodded slightly. Kalika walked stiffly with long strides to the door and entered the smaller room. A thick column supported the short room and a door that looked just like all of the doors throughout the entire facility stood adjacent to the first.

The Arbiter kept his distance a few feet behind her and stood against the wall beside the door.

As soon as the panels hissed and shoved closed with a thud beside him, he looked up at Kalika, who was standing with her back toward him, "...Am I not here fighting, if not for love?" he asked wearily.

Kalika slowly turned around and motioned her uninjured arm quizzically, "You call this fighting for love?" She asked with the same amount of languor weighing down her tone.

Thel also spread his arms slightly, "Then what am I fighting for?" His voice was neap and helpless.

Kalika breathed heavily and bowed her head, "You should have asked yourself that question twenty-seven years ago before you left your family."

Thel's eyes widened at her slightly as the words bit and sliced at his hearts, "Kalika, I-"

The opposite door began to hiss and a thick gray fog surged forth from its lower crevices. Thel's communications came alive with the pilot's voice, "Leader! The storm is about it hit! We cannot maintain our position!" His voice was urgent and full of panic.

Vadumee's soothing voice responded calmly, "Bring the Phantoms close to the mine. We're not leaving until the leader of these heretics is dead."

The panels peeled away from each other and a hot wind pulled at the blue and purple feathers on Kalika's armor. It whipped across Thel's face as he followed Kalika out onto a bridge.

The thick bridge connected to a tall tower with ramps spiraling up onto platforms and tiers. Flood swarmed toward their end of the bridge as heretics tried to hold them off at the very bottom ramps. There was no doubt that the heretics' leader was cowering away there. Thel and Kalika ran toward the middle of the bridge where reinforcements were holding off the Flood. As soon as the soldiers recognized the silver flash of the Arbiter's armor, they began to fall back to accompany him.

Commander 'Vadum came online on the coms once again, this time his tone being slightly more stern, "Arbiter, the Flood have spread throughout the station. We don't have enough troops to manage a large infestation. Find the leader of these heretics. Kill him now!"

Thel nodded toward the group of reinforcements, "Understood. Two of you, come with me. The rest of you, stay here and hold your position until the commander returns."

The two closest black-armored troops to him ran forth with him as the rest yelled words of affirmation. The two troops pounded their heavy boots behind the Arbiter as they charged toward the bottom of the ramps leading up to the tower. The storm swirled beneath them in thick green and red arms of cloud and radioactive electricity, pounding the facility with blazing winds and shrieking its rage in their hidden ears.

Kalika deactivated her camouflage and appeared behind a golden armored Sangheili, shoving her foot into his ankle and ramming the ridge of her hand into the side of his throat. He was forced to fall to the ground and onto his side with a subtle bang of his armor. She still had her left arm folded toward the middle of her back, therefore she had to adjust to different means of balance. One of the Unggoy behind her began to prepare a plasma grenade as she lifted her knee up. The Grunt didn't get a chance to throw his grenade and instead got a mouth full of Kalika's boot. She drew her knee up again, outstretching her leg entirely, raising her heel up near her shoulder, and then swiftly dug her armored heel into the collapsed Sangheili's temple. His body flinched as Kalika once again drew her knee up. She could hear the heavy thuds of another heretic's footfalls advancing behind her. She bent her other knee and spun on her heel, hugging her raised knee to her chest as she whirled around. He was several feet away from her when she outstretched her leg at full length, but at the right moment, her heel swatted him across his lower chins. She quickly stood on one leg again and planted her risen foot on the ground, sinking into a lowered defensive stance. The Arbiter surged forth, energy sword drawn by his side, and swung his weapon upward across the heretic's chest. The enemy collapsed and more came down the ramps. One of the soldiers behind Thel cried out, "Cleansing flame!"

A plasma grenade flew over head in a bright blue cloud and stuck in one of the heretic's helmet. Several tried to leap away too late, and the grenade exploded with a high pitched squeal and a flash of plasma. The ramp was clear of opponents (but not of bodies). The Arbiter led the way up to the higher levels where more heretics

prepared for them behind crates and tall pillars.

Thel advanced with Kalika flanking his side and the soldiers covering his back. They were close. Thel could smell the leader's trail as they swung, stabbed, shot, and fired through Sesa's useless attempts to slow them down. The Stealth troops behind him had exquisite aim, Thel observed, as they fired their pistols and rifles at heretics ducking behind pillars.

Kalika took the lead and leaped up on top of a large crate half of her size. She slid and gripped the edge as she crouched down, baring her fangs and roaring fiercely. Two heretics ran forward wielding energy swords and swiftly approached the edge of the crate. At the last moment, the Arbiter landed on the crate with a heavy bang. With a foot on either side of Kalika, he swung his energy sword forward, slashing its tips across one of the heretic's face as Kalika lashed out with her leg and slammed the bottom of her foot into the others muzzle.

Kalika looked up, where she was given a... fairly appreciative view, "If it were not for the given circumstances-"

Thel forgot there was some one underneath him when an Unggoy tossed a plasma grenade at his head. His instant reflex was to crouch and duck-

The two soldiers looked away and winced. The grenade flew over him at least, but it came with a price.

Kalika had fallen over the edge and lay blinking at the bottom of the crate, "...or we can forget the current circumstances. That's alright, too."

The Arbiter was still in a kneeling position and had one hand clenched over his sword while the other grabbed the inside of his leg plate. He couldn't blame Kalika for angling her helmet just so that he had crouched directly above its sharp point, but perhaps if she wasn't playing games and looking up, he wouldn't have to deal with this at all. "Can we please..." He managed after a while, blinking his eyes, "...focus on the mission... and save the play for afterward?"

He slowly rose with a wince and stepped down from the crate, walking stiffly toward a door on their left that led inside. Kalika sat up, "I was not the one jumping on top of people."

At that precise moment, Rtas 'Vadumee rounded the corner. He frowned disapprovingly, "Who was jumping on top of whom?"

Kalika stood as Thel groaned softly in agitation. The door panels disappeared into the walls with an accommodating beep as the Arbiter quickly regained himself. They walked into a smaller, darker room with three other doors. Kalika took the lead again as Thel limped briskly behind her.

The middle door opened first, revealing a humongous room. Two ramps on either side of the chamber spiraled upward to higher levels, and up ahead was another door.

Kalika's eyes narrowed on an Elite in crimson armor running toward

the door- Sesa 'Refumee. She immediately took off running after him, quickly gaining. Thel willed himself to ignore the pain in between his legs and abdomen, and ran as fast as he could manage to follow her.

Kalika almost had him. She was focused and readied herself for the pounce-

Another heretic came out of nowhere and barreled toward her, wielding an energy blade and roaring a challenge, catching her attention as he bore down on her. Kalika was forced to be distracted and ducked down, throwing a punch into his lower rib cage. He choked, but swung his sword around. He wasn't going to let her escape.

Thel ran past. He had one mission; one goal, and it was straight ahead of him. The door up ahead parted for Sesa as Thel thundered behind him. Sesa entered the door, but before Thel could follow him, a bright blue plasma barrier, not unlike the ones in High Charity's prisons, crackled to life and blocked the door way. Thel stopped running and slowed as he approached the door.

Sesa was slightly taller than he was and wore bright red armor. HUD goggles covered his eyes and wrapped around his head. A similar spiny breathing apparatus stuck up from his back, and it shook and shifted as Sesa leaned in toward the door. "This will save me from the storm, but you will be consumed." He sneered in a husk voice.

Thel rose his fist and pounded it angrily against the barrier as the panels of the door slammed shut behind it.

7. Log 06

CONSORT

of the

HERETIC

Created By Cyber and Zmori

Written by Zmori

Edited by ShoopWoop17

/Access Data Logs

20 October, Year 2552

Forerunner Gas Mine, Planet Threshold

20:57 Hours

CONNECTING...

LOG 06

The Arbiter turned away from the closed door as Rtas 'Vadumee ran up the steps toward him. The Commander slowed and tilted his head at Thel's irritable expression. "Arbiter," He began as Thel strode up to

him. "Where is he?"

The Arbiter paused beside the Commander to give him a knowing glance. Rtas stared at him for a while and looked back up toward the door, understanding. Thel stepped down and walked toward Kalika.

"Stinking Flood bait boxed himself in tight." Rtas spat, his bright green eyes narrowed on the plasma shields and the locked doors. He turned to look back at the Arbiter, "We'll never get through this."

Thel looked up at a pedestal in the middle of the room where Kalika pointed one of her fingers. She stood slightly to his right as he observed the hologram of the entire facility. It was a tall structure with long arms of pillars arching down toward its wider bases. Three large cables connected the two halves of the facility and areas where the Flood had caused damage to the facility were marked in red dots.

An idea sparked quite suddenly.

"...Then we will force him out."

"...How?" Rtas inquired, turning his head to look at Thel with a raised eye-ridge.

Thel rose his finger and also pointed at the hologram. "The cable..." He said as Rtas also looked up at the cables at the top of the hologram. "I'm going to cut it."

The two soldiers were standing behind Kalika, also observing the rotating hologram. Arsen entered the room with a readied rifle as Thel lowered his head, "Get everyone back to the ships."

Rtas nodded and began to relay the commands through the communications as Arsen approached them. Thel nodded toward Kalika, "That includes you."

Kalika's jaws flared as she folded her arms across her chest plates, "As if."

Thel grit the tips of his mandibles as he took a few steps forward. "You will follow them to the ships," He commanded with a very serious furrow of his eye-ridges, "Especially since you are-" He stopped himself when Kalika gave him a warning glare.

Rtas frowned and looked up. He started to walk toward Kalika with a slight bow of his head. "Especially since she is... what?" He asked in a dangerous tone.

Kalika refused to look at him and gave Thel a look of annoyance. Rtas stood beside her and flared his nostrils to sniff her scent. The other three soldiers tilted their heads in confusion.

Rtas suddenly whirled around, glaring angrily at the Arbiter, "I thought that I said no mating on the field!" He growled.

Arsen blinked in disbelief, "I had my eyes on them the whole time. There is no way that they-"

Kalika shrugged her shoulders, "Things were getting intense, we didn't know if we would make it out alive, and-"

"Impossible!" Arsen blurted angrily.

Kalika gave Arsen an almost annoyed expression, but she smiled at how uncomfortable the warrior seemed. "When?!" was all that he could manage through his clenched jaws.

Rtas now turned on Arsen, "You had one job!"

Kalika found this all extremely amusing, "Arsen's job was to make sure that there was no mating?" She smiled at Rtas, "I am flattered."

A growl thundered in Rtas' chest as he advanced toward her. "When?" He repeated Arsen's question.

Kalika folded her arms again across her chest. "Arsen, what was the one time that you were not watching us?"

"Just recently." His eyes were squinted in absolute detestation. Kalika slowly walked up to him, widening her eyes at him knowingly as Thel rubbed at the pain in his muzzle.

"Not unless you-"

And then it hit him like the impact of a plasma bomb.

Kalika smiled softly as Arsen's eyes widened in disbelief. "That couldn't have been more than five minutes!" He growled, taking an angry step forward. When Kalika tilted her head at him again, his chest swelled with rage, "Are you saying that when Ral was trying to speak kindly of you, you were in there-" He nearly spat with loathing. "That is impossible." He said after a while. "You are both in full armor, not to mention, you have suits on."

"Do you really need me to explain it to you?" Kalika asked innocently.

Arsen was ready to lose his temper. He couldn't help but to feel like she was trying to prove that she was more intelligent than he was. He had to stop himself for a moment. He had almost forgotten that she was just a selfish, stuck-up, obnoxious female looking for attention. Why was he allowing her to get under his skin?

He unclenched his jaws and loosened his shoulders, but he did not relax his expression. Instead, his eye-ridges pulled back and he curled his lip in disgust, baring several long fangs. "No." He said acidly. "I do not wish to know."

Rtas rubbed his snout and turned to walk away, "Every damn time." He grumbled.

Thel finally pulled his palm away from his muzzle and looked up at Kalika with a weary look. "Fine. You are coming with me; the rest of you, to the ships."

She would find a way to follow him anyway, whether he liked it or not. A victorious smile crept across Kalika's face, infuriating the

hell out of Arsen, and she fell in line behind the Arbiter. Arsen exhaled sharply and looked up at Thel, "We will not forget your sacrifice." Rtas and his three soldiers split up with the Arbiter and ran for the door as Kalika led the way up to the spiral ramps.

Arsen followed Rtas outside where a Phantom waited with its blue rays already trained and hovering over the platforms. "Oh." Rtas suddenly said. "Keep your blade handy." He advised as they stepped over bodies to get to the ship. "I doubt the cable can withstand the bite."

Rtas stopped at the edge of the blue circle glowing on the ground and nodded toward his soldiers to continue ahead of him. Arsen quirked an eye-ridge at him as the two other soldier were taken up by the light and up toward the belly of the Phantom. Rtas' bright green eyes gave him a knowing look. "You never know; where those two are concerned."

Arsen had to believe him. He did not see those turns of events coming. When he was informed of an exception to the mission, he was not expecting her. When 'Vadumee had assigned him his "special mission", he was not expecting this. He most certainly didn't expect them to get away with it. It infuriated him that he couldn't figure out how she had outsmarted him, and when he tried to, images that should not ever go through his mind made him want to recoil.

"She set you up." Rtas mused as they floated up toward the ship.

Arsen blinked and looked up at the Commander, who was observing him with a thoughtful gaze. When Arsen stared at him in confusion, Rtas smiled in understanding. "She may be pretty, but she is intelligent. Those are the most dangerous kinds of females." He said as they were gently placed on the floor of his ship. "Pull the ships away from the storm, but remain close to the facility." He demanded of the pilot in the cabin. "We need to be ready to assist them if they need us." Arsen followed Rtas into the cabin as the other two soldiers remained behind.

"The only way to beat her at her own game is not to play at all." He said in a lower voice, looking over the Jiralhanae's shoulder and observing the screens. The storm was displayed on one screen behind a grid as a swirling red vortex slowly made its way to their coordinates. The other screens displayed temperatures, wind currents, and other data of the outside world. One yellow dot made its way up to the top of the facility- no doubt, the Arbiter. The female couldn't be read off of the radar, or any of the other screens for that matter. Two chairs were occupied at the front of the of the cabin by Jiralhanae, who read the screens and stopped speaking in hushed voices when 'Vadumee entered the room. Rtas took a seat in the single chair behind them as Arsen took position slightly behind him.

"You seem to have her figured out, Commander." Arsen mused in return.

'Vadumee nodded up toward the Jiralhanae, "Pilot, how long until them storm strikes?"

"An hour, sir." The Brute said with a gnarled voice.

A heavy huff escaped 'Vadumee's flaring nostrils as he bowed his head in thought. After a while, he lifted his chin and scratched absent-mindedness at the base of his half-jaws, "She and I have been... previous acquaintances."

Surprised, Arsen looked down at Rtas. "For how long?"

'Vadumee tilted his head at the question thoughtfully and at the boldness of Arsen's curiosity. "I met her when we were very young." He smiled softly at a memory that Arsen assumed was associated with his statement. "'Vadamee and I were both children."

Arsen hadn't imagined that they knew each other that long. He arched his ridges slightly, "Was she as bad then, as she is now?"

"All my Phantoms are in the air, Arbiter. Go ahead! Cut the cable!" Rtas commanded through the communications as soon as the Phantoms cleared of the storm's path. There was no reply, but he could see 'Vadamee's yellow dot move across the top of the facility.

'Vadumee shook his head slightly, "One would think that she was spoiled and weak off of the riches of her family. Despite her higher standing, she was the kindest and most respectable girl that I had the honor of meeting."

Again; not what he was expecting to hear.

"Her... higher standing?"

"Yes." Rtas paused for a moment, keeping an eye on the screens. Eventually, he looked up at Arsen, "She was studying with the Priestesses before she became a Noble."

That explained where she had learned her close combat skills. The Priestesses were worshipers of the gods, and they were not females that you wanted to mess with. They were known for their attitude if their ways were questioned, and were respected for their knowledge. They held the largest amount of power that any female could have. These robed women performed rituals of marriage, funerals, and it was their duty to protect the holy relics of the Forerunners. It was not a job to be taken lightly. It required years of rigorous study, harsh training, challenging trials, and it was both mentally and physically trying.

Rtas looked down again, his attention focused back on the screens. "The Priestesses were walking the streets as they do every week, singing of their gods and ancient legends in the old languages. 'Vadamee wanted to follow them, despite my wanting to explore the markets. Among the Priestesses was a very young girl who trailed behind the others, wearing red apprentice robes and reading from the ancient scripts. When she sang solo, Thel ignored me and disappeared into the crowd to go to find out what the sound was."

'Vadumee's eyes took on a brighter kind of light as the memory came to life before him. "'Vadamee stared like a lovestruck fool when she turned the corner. He was... enchanted by their gorgeous voices and subdued by their beautiful features. The girl looked up from her book, and for the briefest moment, they saw each other." He began to chuckle softly, "She dropped her book and 'Vadamee ran out into the

street to help her."

"Crazy fool." He chortled. "She was, of course, punished for her clumsiness, and he followed her- what is taking them so long?" He suddenly growled. Arsen looked up at the screens again, observing the yellow dot flashing at the top of the facility.

As if on cue, the top half of the facility jerked and began to tilt. 'Vadumee sat up on the edge of his seat, activating his communications, "That's one." He looked up at the cameras of the live feed of the mining facility. "By the Prophets, look at the station list!"

Indeed, the facility began to sway on two cables, and Arsen watched in amazement as the large structure began to move away from them.

Kalika had to readjust as the floor tilted beneath her feet. She held a normal energy blade within her right hand, allowing her left arm to remain immobile by her side. Thel must have just cut the first cable. She looked up at the second pillar that protected the cable. The uppermost level of the station had three ramps in a triangle shape with two slopes connecting to a full floor. Three pillars stood at the corners of each ramp, each pillar surrounding the thick cables that connected them with the storage ship.

A Sangheili in gold armor charged toward her with a blue plasma blade readied before his chest. A growl rippled through her throat as she surged forth to meet him, holding her sword up. At the last several feet of distance, she jumped up, confusing the enemy for a moment. He reacted and motioned his sword upward to slash across her waist, but she swung her blade outward to knock his attack away.

Now... she hadn't exactly thought this through. When it came to fighting, it was always an improvisation, and therefore, she always ended up doing something crazy or ridiculous.

This was one of those times.

Without arms to create an attack, she rose her knees above either of his shoulders, slamming her thighs on either side of his head as they both went down toward the ground. The heretic gasped in confusion, pain, and shock as the back of his head bounced off of the ground. Kalika's knees slammed down on either side of his throat, and she sat up, raising her sword. One spoke went into his parted mouth as the other dug through the top of his neck when she brought the sword down. She jerked the blade forward until his body was completely still.

She pulled her sword away, standing and looking across the ramps where the Arbiter was already making his way to the third pillar. Kalika ran forward toward the second column, disregarding the Sentinels that flew toward her. She swung her sword across the small slit in the pillar as soon as it was in reach. The cable creaked, but did not break. She cut at the cable again and again until there was a satisfactory snap. The station jerked and tilted again, creaking dangerously on its single cord.

"One final cable, Arbiter!" Rtas said into Thel's communications. The Arbiter approached the last column, shoving a Sentinel off of his

blade. He readied his sword and swung through the cable again and again.

"What made her change?" Arsen couldn't help but to allow his curiosity get the best of him. Perhaps he could find reason to better understand the unpredictable female.

Perhaps.

Rtas cast a strange expression at him before breathing a little more excessively than necessary. "Ask me again after we make it out alive from this mission."

The station creaked for a moment before disconnecting with the larger ship. The facility fell before them, rapidly dropping toward an outstretched arm of the storm.

"Follow them!" 'Vadumee commanded. Their Phantoms dipped their noses and dived, sending those without chairs into the floor as the large ships kept pace with the falling structure. "That did it! The station is in free fall!"

Thel noticed this when it felt like his stomach tried to jump up into his throat. The wind howled and screamed in his ears as the many parts of the station groaned from the pressure. He began to run toward the elevator (a platform that fit the hole in the floor with a single panel on it), doing his best to disregard the nauseous feeling in his chest. Kalika was already at the edge of the platform, but she was struggling to keep her feet on the floor. The Sentinels were far above them by now if they hadn't already been crushed against the arched columns overhead. The Arbiter came down the ramps as Kalika grabbed onto the elevator's control panel. The facility began to vibrate, jerking up and down as they drew closer to the planet's red gaseous surface. As soon as Thel's boot touched down on the elevator, Kalika slammed her palm on the switch button.

The elevator immediately began to drop at rapid speeds. The tunnel flashed red lights across its octagonal shaft as the elevator fell, shuddering and whirring as it went. Thel looked up, watching the skies above them grow smaller and dimmer. Kalika's hand suddenly clenched around his wrist, catching him by surprise and making him look down at her curiously. She stood by his side with her eyes closed and her other hand balled up in a fist. She looked like she was going to be sick.

With nobody else around, she didn't care to camouflage to hide her slight claustrophobia. She had nothing to hide from him.

Well... almost nothing.

The elevator opened into the tall room with its spiral ramps descending down onto the floor again. The blue barrier still protected the door far down below, but Thel's new target was the open door on the adjacent wall that led to the outside. As soon as the elevator stopped, Kalika released his wrist, opened her eyes, and they both began to run down the steep slopes. When they were far enough below the platform, Kalika leaped off of the edge of the ramp and landed on one of the lower platforms with a low "thud".

Thel followed her, landing with a much louder boom, and together they

jumped off at the same time to the floor level. The entire building was shaking rapidly, making it hard to meet solid ground with balance. Kalika activated her camouflage as they approached the door. Its panels parted just as Thel followed her lead, revealing a room full of armored heretics waiting for them. He could see the swift movement up ahead where Kalika had already made her way to the back of the room. A dark open shaft dropped down below to the lower levels. The heretics looked up when the door opened, but Thel was already halfway across the room. Kalika ran ahead and fell down into the chamber below noiselessly where more troops waved their weapons' points at the shadowy corners. Thel held his breath as they hurried past the unknowing Sangheili and Unggoy. They had little time. Thel couldn't allow him to escape again. Sesa's scent trailed ahead through an open doorway where searing winds lashed like whips through the already hot air. Thel had to blink his eyes as they ran outside where there were shortcuts to the lower area of the mining facility.

"Do you know where you are going?" Thel called ahead as his camouflage fell away. Sangheili wearing Sesa's colors looked up and pointed their weapons at the Arbiter as he descended down the ramps toward them. The soldier closest to him opened fire, although, not for long. A seemingly invisible force flung him off of the ramp, and shortly after, Kalika appeared further down. Her foot dug into another Elite's muzzle to clear Thel's path, also shoving him off the platform and into the embrace of the storm below.

She looked up and nodded, "Always." She motioned her hand toward the bottom of the ramp where another open doorway led into the facility. Again, they ran on the tips of their toes.

"The Oracle must be saved!" A voice called ahead. Thel recognized Sesa's voice reverberating in the halls and entered them with a sudden change of air temperature. The screaming wind was left behind him, and as the sound of it died away, the blaring sirens and red lights met him instead.

The halls were so dark that he couldn't even see the shadow of Kalika unless the emergency lights reflected off of her armor. He followed the sound of her footfalls as she led him on Sesa's path. The next thing he knew, they were running through doors again and the wind found him once more. Sesa's red armor caught his eye on an open balcony where two purple and gold Banshees rested on the platform. Kalika disappeared and Thel pressed his back against the wall, preparing himself for a fight.

The purr of a Banshee sounded instead of the loading of a gun. He was running away, still. Thel should have known better. He held up his carbine and aimed around the open door, firing at the flying ship. The wind was so powerful that none of his shots hit the target. He looked back down at the other Banshee where Kalika was resting her arm along the dorsal hood. Her eyes had that dangerous light among them that told him that she was devising a crazy plan.

Sesa was getting away and Thel had no time for her games. He couldn't leave her here. He approached the single Banshee and looked down at Kalika's mischievous gaze in a fearful manner.

"Have you ever heard of Banshee surfing?" She asked, still observing the Banshee's hood.

"This is no time for games--"

"Do you trust me?" Her eyes squinted ever so slightly as her gaze focused on him. He stared back with a knowing look. She eventually nodded her head, "Do not answer that."

She walked around to the front of the Banshee and yelled over the wind, "Get in!"

He didn't like this, but he obliged and swung himself into the cockpit. The Banshee hissed as his fingers hovered over the controls. With a roar of the engine and a warm blue glow of the thrusters, he took off with the hope that Kalika had a plan.

The top of the Banshee banged above his head, making him flinch in surprise and quickly readjust his course.

"What in the name of--"

"What lunacy!" The Commander said over the communications. "He'll never escape the maelstrom in a Banshee!" 'Vadumee leaned forward in his chair, placing two index fingers against the base of his half jaws that gave him his nickname. "Wait. The hanger! There was a Seraph fighter inside. Arbiter, you know what to do."

Thel checked the cameras, and sure enough, behind him, banshees follows him with bombs weighing their launchers in a bright glow of green. He looked ahead and frowned.

"Remove your rear end from the front of the ship." He said, then realizing that she couldn't hear him.

That was not the response that the Commander was expecting. "Excuse me?" Rtas inquired in a dangerous tone.

"I was not addressing you, Leader."

"...Then who are you addressing?"

"Kalika is riding on top of the Banshee."

'Vadumee stared for a long time at the blue monitors on the deck as Arsen rubbed his fingers across his eye-ridges.

The claws on all four of Kalika's armored toes dug into the heavy armor of the Banshee and her textured gloves were pressed against the hood with spread palms. The wind beat and screamed wildly in her ears, slamming her down and lifting her up seemingly all at once in an extreme jolting manner. Her eyes were closed tightly. She did not dare move a single muscle.

The Banshee twisted and wobbled through the air as Thel followed Sesa toward the lower sector of the facility.

"Are you still alive, Arbiter? We're keeping pace as best we can." 'Vadumee reassured him.

Thel focused his attention on the balcony that Sesa was headed toward. He didn't want to open fire with Kalika struggling to stay on

the hood. He could see Sesa land on the platform and fumble out of the Banshee. He slunk into the safety of the facility as Thel still progressed toward the ledge. He pressed hard on the thrusters to give them speed. Kalika growled with the intensified strain. Her arms were shaking and her feet were cramping. She managed to open her eye lids, but kept the protective membrane over her sclera. The ledge was up ahead.

The wind softened as they approached the lee side of the building. Kalika managed to curl herself up into a crouch and steadied her hands. When the Banshee's nose was feet away from the ledge, Kalika shoved down hard with her legs just as Thel began to pull down. She soared through the air for a moment and landed strangely on her fatigued legs.

The force was too much and unexpected. Too late, Thel tried to pull up. The Banshee twisted and dived. He ejected right before the ship rammed itself into the ledge with a loud shriek of tearing metal and seething flames. Thel was shoved out of the Banshee and up into the air. Kalika leaned dangerously over the ledge with an outstretched arm down toward him, supporting herself with her stronger arm. He reached up and wrapped his hand around hers as the Banshee fell into the churning dark clouds.

Kalika flared her mandibles and roared, closing her eyes as her arm shivered with the strain but still using every ounce of her strength to ensure that he did not fall. She held on long enough for him to pull himself up. He grabbed the platform with his other hand and released Kalika, who sat back and breathed heavily.

Thel looked up at her. "Are you alright?"

She nodded stiffly and stood, bowing her head against the harsh breath of the storm. Thel pulled himself up and also bowed his head, struggling to make it to the entrance. The door was stuck open, allowing them to enter the dark building. The red lights still flashed and a siren echoed somewhere off in the distance.

They both breathed heavily as they ran up a ramp and hung a left into a twisting hallway. Thel had been here before. He knew, because Ral's body still lay in the corner of the room. The parasite was already here. Several infected bodies made their way toward Ral as Thel and Kalika ran up the ramps and through the open doorway, avoiding the Flood and the few stray heretics left behind.

If it were not for Kalika's guidance, he wouldn't be able to track down Sesa as fast as they did now. She ran as if she had known the place her whole life. They were going back through the maze of hallways and elevators, but the trip seemed so much shorter than coming through the first time. This was most likely because of the fact that they were dodging past everything and avoiding quarrels with the Flood and the heretics. Thel noticed this as they barreled down red-flashing tunnels, swerving around tight corners, and crossing large chambers. Thel remembered there being more bodies than this. Had the parasite already been through here so quickly? Several stray Unggoy ran around the rooms, flailing their arms in panic. The Sangheili had the nerve to aim their weapons, but Thel and Kalika either dodged around or jumped over them.

Within a matter of minutes, they had reached the hanger. Kalika

disappeared as they rounded the corner into the three-storied room. Thel, alone, ran into the room and looked up at the Seraph. Sesa 'Refumee leaped up onto the hood of the ship and prepared to enter.

Thel stepped forward and called out in a demanding tone, "Turn, heretic."

Sesa turned at the sound of his voice and curled his lip with a smile tugging on his cheeks. "Arbiter..." The title rolled across his tongue as if sampling the taste of it and finding it amusing. He stepped down off of the ship, shifting it, and motioned with a buck of his muzzle toward the air, "I would rather die by your hand than have the Prophets lead me to slaughter."

Thel tilted his head, blinked, and furrowed his eye ridges together, "Who has taught you these lies?"

A sort of humming sound came from above. Thel looked up and stared at a levitating device descending toward him. It was a robot of obvious Forerunner design with its sleek silver surface and simple yet recognizable structure. A bright blue light glowed in the center of its rounded, cubed body and dark blue thrusters from the inside allowed it to float before the Arbiter. Thel blinked in surprise. "The Oracle (**19**)?"

"Hello!" The device said in a cheerful manner. Its voice was distorted by its speakers and the machine's lack of natural vocal cords. "I am 343 Guilty Spark." Guilty Spark hovered above Thel's face. "I am the monitor of installation zero-four."

Sesa spoke again, motioning his hand toward Guilty Spark. "Ask the Oracle about Halo; how they would sacrifice us all for nothing!" He growled.

"More questions?" The Oracle inquired with a happy bounce. "Splendid! I would be happy to assist!"

Thel stared doubtfully at the Oracle. He could not believe the heretics' beliefs of their corrupt theocracy. The Prophets were holy and righteous in their paths. They had one good purpose; to carry the Covenant aboard the Great Journey. Why would they betray their own? Thel would not have served them so loyally for so long all for nothing. Then again, doubts had always risen to his mind. His own wife had always doubted the Prophets, even if she had trained with the Priestesses on Sanghelios. He was afraid that he would lose faith in a worthy cause if he had doubts. When he did have doubts, he always kept them in the back of his head. Now, an Oracle, the very guardian of his faith, was trying to affirm those doubts. Everything that he had believed in and fought for was... a lie? Was this what Kalika meant?

...What _was_ he fighting for?

No. It was wrong. The Oracle could have been misled or reprogrammed by the heretics. How-

Reality yanked him hard from his thoughts. Plasma flared across the surface of his shields and knocked him back. He fumbled behind a pillar and readied his carbine.

"The Elites are blind, Arbiter!" Sesa called. Kalika looked down from her position on the second floor. Sesa held up two circular devices in each palm and said, "...but I will make them see." The two orbs began to glow and spiraled up into the air.

"Holographs..." Kalika muttered in amusement. Sure enough, three Sesa 'Refugees' hovered in midair, each with a jet pack, and each dual-wielding plasma rifles. Kalika backed up and looked around herself, searching for a weapon of her own. Guilty Spark floated lazily about the room, twisting and turning while humming a merry tune.

Kalika's face darkened the moment she recognized the tune. It was looking for her. She uncloaked and stood as Sesa attacked Thel below. She would help him as soon as she was finished. Guilty Spark stopped humming and hovered before her face.

Her two bright blue eyes stared into his one bright blue eye. She breathed shakily and said in a heavier tone, "Begin data logging application."

"Preparing data log." Guilty Spark replied. "Code name required for access."

Kalika closed her eyes and sighed heavily, "Adversity."

"Recording for code name: Adversity."

Kalika blinked, and Guilty Spark's eye flickered in return. "Let's make this quick." She said and crossed her arms.

Thel ducked behind another tall pillar on the west side of the room. He panted heavily and reloaded his carbine.

"How did the Prophets buy your loyalty, Arbiter?" Sesa asked from the opposite side of the room. A heavy exhale shuddered beneath Thel's helmet. "With a new command? A new fleet?"

Sesa appeared beside him with a haughty smirk. Thel spun around and fired his weapon multiple times at him, but his image disintegrated and a silver sphere fell to the ground. Another holograph.

"Or was it the promise?" Sesa continued, his voice drifting in different areas of the room. "Their 'Great Journey'?"

Thel spun around the pillar and aimed his gun at another Sesa. Before he could pull the trigger, Kalika appeared on the second floor with her arm wrapped around Sesa's throat. "ARBITER, W-" He choked when a gun was shoved between his mandibles and hot plasma seared his throat. Kalika quickly released him as if she were disgusted with him. Sesa crumpled on the ramp beneath him and looked up in confusion at the female approaching him. "...Who...?" He tried to speak, but he was dying quickly.

Kalika stood over him and pointed her rifle at his muzzle. "I'm his wife." The plasma built swelled at the rifle's tip before she released a volley upon Sesa's head.

Thel approached when Kalika had finished. She stepped back and curled her lip, "I can not stand it when they monologue."

Thel reached down and grabbed Sesa by his jet pack. He drug him off of the ramp and across the floor. Kalika stood for a moment before following.

"Unfortunate." Guilty Spark proclaimed as Thel approached him beside the open doors. Thel was to await the arrival of 'Vadumee's ship here. Until then, he could perhaps get some answers out of the Oracle. Guilty Spark continued, "His edification was most enjoyable."

"I had no choice, Holy Oracle. This Heretic imperiled the Great Journey." Thel replied.

The gates opened behind him as the Phantoms approached. The Arbiter lay down Sesa's body and the Oracle turned to look at him, "Oracle? Sacred Journey? Why do you meddlers insist on using such inept verbiage?"

Thel stared at 343 for a while, preparing an answer until a bright blue plasma shield surrounded Guilty Spark. Kalika looked up in surprise, recognizing the the same force that had kept her prisoner in High Charity.

The monitor cried out in shock as its body was pulled against its will toward a Phantom ship that must have landed earlier. "OH MYYY!" It wailed. The Arbiter turned and looked upon the Jiralhanae Chieftain, Tartaras, who held the monitor against his specialized gravity hammer.

"That is the Oracle!" Thel said with agitation singeing his tone.

Tartarus grabbed the Oracle and tossed him casually into the glowing blue light of the Phantom. Thel watched in horror as the monitor floated up into the ship and disappeared. "Hmm, so it is." Tartarus snorted and kicked his chin upwards. "Come. We are leaving this system."

Thel still stared at Tartarus with an irritated expression. Kalika walked around him and looked around expectantly at the Arbiter. She began to walk up to the Phantom, but Tartarus lifted his hand to stop her. "The Arbiter boards first, disrespectful scum." He growled.

Kalika stopped and her pupils narrowed into slits. "Why should it matter, he who smells of piss?" She asked acidly.

"Just because you are the Arbiter's play toy does not permit you any special treatment, female. I suggest you stop acting as such." Tartarus said as he glared down at her with blazing orange eyes. Kalika glared back with widened eyes. Before Kalika could speak or make a move, Thel stepped between them. He grabbed Kalika's hand and looked up at Tartarus with a warning show of his teeth.

"Let us go." He said and walked with Kalika by his side. Kalika was still trying to glare at Tartarus over her shoulder and would part her mandibles to speak, but Thel tugged on her to stop. Kalika stopped walking and pulled her hand away. Thel sighed wearily and turned his head to look at her. She gave him the most unforgiving,

angry, and hurt expression he had seen in a very long time. Thel shook his head. "Not here, Kalika. Not now. Let us reach safety and we shall figure things out from there. I promise."

She stared at him with that same expression a while longer before stepping back. Thel nodded and stepped forth on board the ship. The gravity thrusters pulled up on board. His eyes had to adjust to the darkness of the Phantom. He nodded to Rtas in the cabin as Kalika rose up behind him. He walked wearily toward the back of the ship and stood in his normal position beside the drop doors. Kalika took her position by his side as the ship hummed and jolted against the turbulence of the storm. She didn't care to stand.

Kalika slid her back against the wall and sat down on the floor, drawing her knees up to her chest and resting her arms against her thighs. Thel arched an eye ridge at her curiously as the ship tilted. Tartarus walked toward the cabin, leaving them both alone for the moment.

Thel finally gave in and sighed. He, too, sat down with an outstretched arm. He wrapped his arm around her tightly and pulled her close against his side. She exhaled with fatigue and rested her head on his shoulder, leaning her knees against his and parting her jaw in a small yawn. Thel, too, yawned, and then rested his cheek against her head. He held her close, listening to her soft breathing, the hum of the ship's engines, and to the steady quieting of the storm as they left it all behind them.

****Author's Notes****

19) The Covenant gods are the Forerunners. Any technology or artifacts known to be Forerunner are sacred, according to the Prophets. Just as the Halo rings are sacred, the "Oracles" are the monitors and guardians of the Halos, and therefore hold high ranking and respect in the Covenant's religion.

8. Log 07

CONSORT

of the

HERETIC

Created By Cyber and Zmori

Written by Zmori

Edited by ShoopWoop17

/Access Data Logs

20 October, Year 2552

Covenant Holy City, High Charity

22:34 Hours

CONNECTING...

LOG 07

Rtas 'Vadumee leaned back in his levitating chair with a flare of his nostrils. His focus drifted from the open file on his desk to the steady beat of footsteps outside of his chambers.

"Come." He said and placed a finger on his desk to minimize the report on the embedded black screen. He looked up as the doors to his quarters opened silently and nodded his head to Arsen.

The soldier hadn't yet changed out of his black Stealth armor. He had removed his HUD contact lenses, revealing his true red eye color. His shoulders were tense and pulled back, signifying his fatigue even as he walked tall with the dignified stride of a specialized Covenant soldier.

"Greetings, warrior. That was a fine mission. It was very well carried out." Rtas said and leaned forward in his chair.

"Thank you, Commander." Arsen said quietly without meeting Rtas' gaze.

'Vadumee folded his hands under his single chin and rested his elbows on his desk, "What is troubling you, brother?"

Arsen stood before his desk in silence. His gaze shifted toward the window that took up the entire east side of 'Vadumee's chambers. The room was dark and the shadows were still. Covenant carriers drifted among the sea of stars in the large black space on the other side of the window. Arsen didn't look away from the window, but asked quietly, "When will the soldiers who fell at Gas Mine be recognized?"

Rtas kept a thoughtful and cool expression. He paused before replying, "Perhaps never."

Arsen turned his head and looked at Rtas. "So Ral and Yummee's efforts will be forgotten? Erased from history forever?"

Rtas lowered his hands from his face. "I know that Ral and Yummee were important to you. The three of you served together for more than ten years. I am sorry for your losses, Arsen, but you must understand that this is the will of the Prophets."

"Because of that damned female?!" Arsen shouted instantaneously. "Do not deny this, Commander, for you know that it is true! Everything started to go wrong the moment she set foot on the ship! If she weren't here, Ral and Yummee would still be alive! She finds this war humorous and laughs in our faces when we have endured twenty-seven years of this hell! She brings nothing but trouble, and because of her, the fallen will never be recognized!"

"What would you have me do, Arsen?" Rtas asked calmly. "The Prophets decided for her to accompany us. It was the Prophets who decreed that she as well as any associated with her to remain hidden. The only reason that the Arbiter and I have not been erased is because our actions too drastically changed events."

"And who helped you to change those events?!" Arsen asked with a curl

of his lip.

"That is not the point, Arsen!" Rtas rose his voice. "If you question her, you question the Prophets! Do you understand me?"

Arsen's chest fell with a heavy exhale and said with a weighed tone, "Yes... Commander."

"Will that be all?" Rtas asked in a sterner tone. Arsen still stood before his desk, but in a much more defeated manner than when he first entered the room. Rtas sighed again, "I am truly sorry that things must be this way, Arsen. Your friends were honorable and exceedingly loyal to their duties."

Arsen stared quietly at his desk where he could see Ral's last report minimized on the screen. "Toward the end of the mission..." Arsen began. Rtas tilted his head curiously. "...You told me to ask you after we completed the mission... why she changed."

Rtas nodded and stood from his chair. "Join me by the window." The Commander took a few steps up on to the raised floor beside the window where four chairs sat against the narrower walls. "Can I get you anything to drink?" He asked before he sat down.

"No, thank you sir." Arsen said as he took the opposite seat closest to the window. Rtas nodded and relaxed into his chair. "I suppose I should start at the beginning."

Arsen kept his attention on Rtas as he looked out among the multicolored stars and dust clouds. He breathed shallowly before speaking. "As you very well know, the states Vadam and Vadum border each other. Thel and I first met each other in the hunting grounds as children. He saved me from a Helioskrill attack, and although we did not escape without a few scars, we became very close friends."

Again, that same light brightened the vibrant green of Vadumee's eyes. "We were rebellious boys then and we met each other often at the border. One of those days, we decided to travel to the nearby city where we first met Kalika."

Rtas looked up at Arsen, "Despite how unlikely the couple seems, they have quite a romantic story. After he saw her in the market, he followed her, and I had no choice but to come along. No matter how much I told him to turn back, he was insistent on returning the clasp of her cloak that she had left behind in the street. It was near dark by the time we reached the temple. He approached the lower window and returned the clasp to her. After that night, he visited her often in secret, and I came along every now and then. The three of us became very close. She was kind, fun, gentle, caring, and knew how to make a game out of everything."

Rtas looked out into space again. "When Thel was caught speaking with her by one of the elder Priestesses, they were both punished severely; Thel most of all. He was so badly injured that his family had to cover up the incident in embarrassment. It broke Thel's hearts when she unexpectedly was moved to an unknown location for 'advanced training' the next day."

"It was she who taught him how to create his _doarmir_ cloak. When he

discovered that she had been moved, he created it to remind himself of his mistakes; not only in his foolish combat against the elderly female but not to underestimate even the most unlikely combatants. It mostly served as a reminder of her to him. No matter how much I stressed to him that he would never see her again, he would never look upon other females and refused to forget her."

Rtas paused for a long time and they both sat in silence. Arsen tilted his head in confusion. "But... they did see each other again."

Rtas nodded, "In a most unexpected way, too." The Commander sighed and began to chortle. "The day was May the seventh."

"The Day of _Eromaes_." Arsen mused.

Rtas nodded, "The Lover's Festival, as they so call it. Thel and I were just entering adulthood. He did not wish to go, but I drug him along with me with the hope that he would move on. He did not take to the crowds very well and insisted on leaving. At the darkest hour of the night, the lanterns were lit and dancers cleared the streets for their performance. One single maiden began to sing before the crowds and danced among the others."

"Kalika."

"Thel recognized her almost immediately. I did not realize he was gone until I watched her approach him at the front of the crowd." Rtas chuckled again. "The poor young warrior was absolutely terrified when she began to dance around him."

A light smile tugged at Arsen's cheeks that were so tight from scowling all of the time. He tried to imagine the scene and did not notice his smile.

"She hadn't changed. She was still her old playful self. After her performance, she ran and tackled the man. I had never seen him so happy in a very long time."

'Vadumee paused and scratched at the base of his half jaws. "I do not think that Thel ever realized that he was not the only one in love."

Arsen blinked at Rtas in surprise, but he continued with a heavier tone, "Several years later, Kalika's temple was attacked by nonbelievers; extremely skilled assassins at that to take on the Priestesses. Thel was there to fight by her side. I joined mid-battle even when the odds were not in our favor. We were so sure that we would not make it out alive. So it was there that he proposed to her. It was not the most traditional wedding that I had ever attended. Nonetheless, one of the other Priestesses there permitted it, gave them her blessing, and in the chaos of the battle, they were married."

Rtas placed both hands on his knees, taking another break before he continued. "Neither of their families liked that very much, but even after we made it out alive, they were both so insistent. They were both from well-known and honorable families and eventually there was an agreement. Kalika no longer wished to be a Priestess so that she could be a wife to Thel."

A bright smile warmed Rtas' tone, "Their first daughter's name was Ila. Thel knew that Ila could never know that he was her father, but that couple must have been the happiest pair of Sangheili that I had ever laid eyes on. Ila was the most enjoyable and lovable child. I was not able to see them that much when the war began. Thel and I had to leave often for long periods of time."

His face slowly relaxed and a sorrowful aspect over took him. "The last time I saw little Ila, she was telling me stories of how her mother took her out to see her favorite animal â€" the Shirath." Rtas' eye ridges furrowed together. "I am... not sure what happened to Ila. All I know is that... one day, Kalika had... changed and Ila was no where to be found."

Arsen lifted his head, but Rtas still stared out into space. "Kalika was a loving and caring mother, and such a dear friend. The next time I met her, all of her words were singed with an acid tone. She never smiled or laughed anymore. She was never as playful or kind. I can only assume that her precious child had died. Perhaps her drastic change of mind was caused by her shock and grief. Although I've never seen her cry or detected any hints of sorrow..."

Rtas turned his head toward Arsen. "Thel nor Kalika will speak of her. I have already tried to ask, but they are both silent. I can only assume things based only on how well I knew them from the past. Shortly after Ila's presumed death, Thel left her for twenty-seven years to go to war and Kalika had no choice but to assume the duty as the Lady of the keep. And now, she discovers recently that her husband is now the Arbiter and nobody can know that she exists."

"They are both very stressed and tired people, as we all are in these trying times. Their relationship is a hard thing to understand. I ask of you to not judge them too quickly."

Arsen scowled. "This does not excuse her for her actions." He said with a heavy sigh.

Rtas shrugged his shoulders. "Perhaps nothing ever will."

Arsen tilted his head and motioned with his hand, "If they are so stressed, why take it out on each other?"

"Because they only have each other. It's a dangerous thing to keep so much pent up inside of you. They haven't been able to be with each other for twenty-seven years. Kalika and Thel fight with each other almost constantly to get everything off of their chest. One of the many reasons that they have been together for so long is that they also constantly forgive each other. They may seem..." Rtas had to think of the word. "...unlikely, but there is a love there." Rtas and Arsen stared at each other for a while. "Any other questions?"

Arsen paused and thought for a moment. "...It is customary for Sangheili to have multiple wives and husbands. Why didn't you ever bond with Kalika before she changed?"

Arsen was surprised when Rtas began to laugh. "I was never in love with Kalika."

Arsen blinked in confusion. Sangheili didn't always marry for love. Most of the time, it was decided by the wives and the Ladies of the keeps to select a spouse, or Sangheili married for the power and wealth of the other. "Then... who are you-?"

Oh. The Commander was homosexual. Well, that changed perspectives a bit. Rtas laughed again. They both looked up when the communication device on Rtas' desk beeped softly, followed shortly by Tartarus' voice, "Commander, come by the hanger. Your ships require a report."

"On my way, Chieftain." Rtas said and stood from his chair. Arsen also stood and bowed his head. Rtas returned the bow and said, "I must take my leave. Thank you, Lieutenant."

"Thank you, sir." Arsen said and followed the Commander out of the room. The lights on his desk dimmed and the only light was coming from the distant suns out in space.

"Impressive." Kalika said softly as they entered the Arbiter's quarters. A wall several yards in front of the entrance did not connect with the hall way walls so that one could walk into the room behind it. A sleek black desk with a floating holographic screen in front of it sat before her. To her left was a door to a filter room and to her right was a sleek black storage unit for food. It was accompanied by shiny black counters and triangular vases with variously colored plants. Several areas of the dark purple walls had softly glowing blue inscriptions pulsing calmly across its metallic surfaces.

Kalika stepped down the slim stairs from the entrance. Her armored boots chinked against the hard floor with a slow and steady rhythm. She turned her head to examine the entire front half of the room. She traced the tips of her fingers across the smooth desk and observed the blinking blue screens with a thoughtful gaze. Thel silently entered the room behind her and watched her take in her surroundings. Kalika suddenly looked up at the vases on the counter. She walked forward and rubbed her thumb along the intricate designs. She turned the vase around and briefly stroke the wide red leaf of the plant. "You are being watched." She said and looked toward the other vases.

Thel nodded. "I know."

Kalika looked at him for a brief moment and then turned toward the opening in the wall beside the desk. She walked through the archway and stepped down small steps into the bedroom. One side of the room had a window that revealed the sparkling mysteries of space and on the other side were sliding doors that most likely led to a closet. In the middle was a wide space with a decorated mat and a bed that curved up against the wall. There were no blankets or sheets; only a covered mattress rested on black wooden supports. Cylinder-shaped pillows were rolled up on the end of the bed.

Kalika stood in the middle of the open space with her tied pack slung over her shoulder. She turned to look at the wall behind her where a single rack stood with two Covenant flags draped on either side upon the walls.

Thel entered on the other side of the room and walked with a heavy,

slow stride. He removed his helmet and set it on the uppermost hook of the rack. Kalika placed her bag on the bed as Thel worked on unclasping the difficult metal. A light smile tugged on her cheeks when she looked up at her husband who was struggling with his armor. She walked forward and shook her head, "No, love, you have to take this part off first. You see?"

Thel lowered his arms and allowed his wife to slide her hands under the neck guards. Each heavy piece was connected underneath by a stretchy band and had to be unclasped from the bottom. Thel breathed through his nostrils. "I am not as familiar with these older models and their required order of removal."

Kalika's tone had lightened and become soothing. "Are you not lucky to have a wife who is?" She inquired as she searched for the last clasp at the base of his neck.

Thel snorted and turned his head so that he could see her. "Lucky, indeed."

Kalika looked up at him with a smile that made her seem... happy. It wasn't a smile that she ever presented in public. She looked back to pull away the armor from his neck. She stepped around him and set the straps over the hooks of the rack, then turned and slid one hand under his large shoulder guard. Her fingers prodded and fiddled until there was a satisfactory click and a tug on her other arm. She pulled off each armor piece in silence.

There was so much that he wanted to say... and yet, even with her here, he could not bring himself to say anything at all. He hadn't had the chance to truly speak with her at all for twenty-seven years. It was always such rushed visits because they both had things they needed to do. Here was his chance to tell her everything... but he stood silently as he watched her remove his armor.

"Can you figure out your boots?" She asked as she stood to place the second thigh plate on the rack. Each silver part was set as if there were a ghostly Elite wearing the Arbiter's armor.

Thel blinked. "...Hm?"

Kalika turned and stared at him. "...Your boots?"

"...Oh. Yes." He said and looked down at the silver armor that elegantly curved around his toes and connected to a row of plates that ran up the front of his foot.

"Tired, love?" Kalika asked as she made her way back to the bed.

Thel knelt down on the woven mat and began to pull the plates up to reach the straps. "Slightly." He said with a weak smile.

Kalika untied the strings to her bag and pulled it open. "They returned my clothes." She mused as she looked inside the dark red bag.

Thel frowned without looking up. "Why would they take your clothes away?" He asked as he pulled his toes out of the boots.

Kalika began to pull her clothes from the bag and ran her fingers through them. "After my failed attempt to stop your branding, I was-"

"You were there?" Thel looked up in bewilderment.

Kalika looked over at him with a single quirked eye ridge. "You have obviously not been informed of at all of my presence. Yes, I was arrested after I tried to stop your punishment. They locked me up in a cell and permitted me to wear my clothes while they held on to and inspected my armor. The problem was..." She couldn't help the humorous smile that crept across her face as she lowered one of her robes. "I continued to escape. I had a variety of hidden weapons and gadgets in all of my clothes. They tried searching them, but I always had something else up my sleeve, until they eventually gave up and simply left me nude." Kalika searched through the bag again. "It would seem that they did not return my weapons, however..."

Thel stared at her in horror. "They left you naked in the prison cell?"

Kalika seemed surprised. "Yes."

"Who saw you?"

"...Why does it matter?"

"Who saw you?" Thel repeated in a sterner tone.

Kalika shrugged her shoulders. "Several Jiralhanae, a few Sangheili. Why does this concern you?"

Thel curled his lip. "Any spouse would be concerned when their consort is inappropriately presented before prohibited eyes."

Kalika scoffed and spread her fingers against her chest. "I was not the one 'inappropriately presented' before the entire crowds of High Charity."

Thel placed his boots at the bottom of the rack and stood to give her an unwanted expression, but she smiled and pulled a special something from her bag. "You told me to hold on to it a long time ago." She said and walked up to him. "I told you that I had 'temporarily misplaced' it quite recently, but..." She held up his dark purple _doarmir_ cloak, folded neatly in her arms.

Thel placed a hand on the cloak's fur and stroked his thumb across the old silver clasp. He smiled weakly and pulled his hand away. "Hold onto it for me a while longer." He said.

Kalika nodded and placed it on the bed with the rest of her clothes. She lifted her helmet off of her head and set it beside the cloak. She began to unhook her pale gold armor. Thel approached her and began to carry each part into the closet, setting each piece on shelves in order.

Kalika, now only in her suit, began to pack her clothes again into her bag. She frowned and looked up when she heard the zipper at the back of her suit slowly pull apart. By the time that Thel had reached the bottom of the suit, he had nearly snapped the zipper off. He

stared at the dark bruises and burn marks that stretched across every inch of her back. Kalika remained very still as he peeled the suit away from each of her shoulder blades. Thel's mandibles were tightly clamped and his eye ridges were furrowed toward each other in a disapproving fashion. He gently placed four of his finger tips on her right right shoulder blade, making her flinch ever so slightly.

He closed his eyes and wrapped his arms around her waist, resting his muzzle against the bare base of her neck and shoulder with a heavy sigh. She, too, closed her eyes and crossed her arms over his. The front of his suit was warm against her back, soothing her aching pains. He nuzzled his snout lovingly against her skin, feeling the steady pulses of her heartbeats as she intertwined her fingers with his. They stayed like that for a very long time. These actions spoke much louder than any words they could offer each other.

Thel breathed softly and, without moving or opening an eye, asked, "What news of Sanghelios?"

Kalika exhaled and opened her eyes, staring blankly at the wall before her. "It is missing one of its most loyal Kaidons. I am afraid that Kaidon will not return the same man as he was before he left."

Thel lifted his muzzle and inquired bemusedly, "Has war had such a dramatic effect on me?"

Kalika still stared at the wall. "For one who has more value over an Oracle than his wife, I would say a dramatic effect indeed."

Thel blinked in surprise. "What are you talking about?" He asked and pulled his head up.

She sighed tiredly. "I am talking about two hours ago when we departed from the Gasmine. You stood before the Jiralhanae Chieftain to defend the Oracle, but when he offended your wife, you walked away."

"I defended you by keeping you out of danger and avoiding the rash decision I knew you would make." Thel replied wearily.

Kalika turned around with an almost sad yet compassionate expression. "Thel, do not misunderstand me. I am not angry or upset. I could care less if you stood off to the side completely. I can take care of myself." She placed her palm over his hearts. "But I want you to see yourself. Would the Thel twenty-seven years ago have acted differently than as the Thel today?" She asked.

Thel flickered his jaws to answer... but he could not lie to himself. He could not lie to her. He stared down at her in silence as she nodded and looked down. "Do you ever think that..." She began as she looked up at him once more. "...perhaps, you go too far for this Great Journey?"

Thel's tone shifted into one of agitation. "You would have me question the Holy Hierarchs? The Great Journey? The Oracles?"

Kalika shrugged her shoulders. "It is a good thing to question and to doubt."

"How can you have such little faith?" He asked in disappointed awe.

Kalika smiled and placed her palms against his cheeks with a chuckle, "My love, you do not know what faith is, then!" Thel still looked at her with confusion and wrapped his hand around her wrist as she spoke. "Having faith is challenging your religion; it is doubting and questioning, and yet still having the strength to believe. That is faith. What you have is not faith. It is obsession! If anyone questions your ways, they must be heretics! It is madness! The Prophets have drilled, not faith, but this mad obsession into your heads for the past twenty-seven years! You have been made blind, Thel!"

Thel shook his head. "I am sorry, Kalika, but I cannot stray from my path. I am not a Kaidon anymore, and no matter how much you may wish it, I cannot be the man I was before I left Sanghelios. For all I know, that man may be dead. I had to change to survive. Please, do not try to make me be some one I cannot be. Not now."

Kalika lowered her hands and stared up at him for a long time. Eventually, she slowly nodded. "I will honor your request for now. We are both weary and we smell of... gods, I do not even know what that is. What say you to a wash, and then I can update you of everything on Sanghelios?"

Thel nodded with a weak smile. "I would be grateful."

Kalika pulled her suit down and slid her arms out of the sleeves. Thel turned to walk back up the stairs as Kalika pulled her gloves off and tossed the suit on a purple padded bench that stretched across the entire length of the window.

The doors to the filter room automatically parted for Thel. There was a tranquil hissing sound of water in the farthest corner of the room. The floors were made of an onyx-colored stone, and the walls were several shades lighter, yet were filled with carved, black inscriptions. In the farthest corner of the room was a traditional Sangheili filter. Clear, sparkling water poured from crevices in the uppermost part of the wall and pooled into a large sunken body in the floor. The pool was exactly level with the floor and rippled around the ends of the waterfalls. Taking up the entire adjacent wall was a mirror that made the room seem bigger than it actually was. Lights at the bottom of the pool made the water seem to glow and lit up the entire room. The air was warm and moist enough to allow colorful plants to grow healthily along a thin dirt path that surrounded the perimeter of the room.

Thel reached a single arm up to find the hidden zipper at the nape of his neck. Kalika found it first and slowly pulled it back across the curve of his neck and down to his tail bone. He pulled his arm out of one side as she helped him with the other. As soon as he stepped out of his suit, he carelessly kicked it toward the opposite corner of the room.

"It would seem that I am not the only one who has had struggles with these past grueling years." Kalika said softly as she looked down at very similar black bruises and purple lacerations across his body.

Thel turned at the very edge of the pool and reached out with his arm as he spoke, "They have been trying for the both of us." He ever so slightly curled his hand around hers and gently tugged her toward him.

The water shimmered as he set down his foot at the bottom of the pool. He winced as the hot water seeped into his wounds. This was only up to his heel. She squeezed his hand as she stepped down with him. Excess water rolled over the edges of the pool, and even more so as they both sunk down painfully into the filter.

They sat facing each other with their legs crossed. Kalika leaned forward and took his hand, gently massaging around his wounds to wash what she could. This style of massage was designed by the earliest Priestesses. It was an ancient art that was created for the purpose of healing the body both physically and spiritually. It was another one of those perks of training with them for nearly thirty years. Its formal name was Pria.

"Tell me of home." Thel said as he stared down at their hands.

Kalika sighed softly as she pressed her thumbs along the lines of his palm. "Where to begin...?" She paused as she thought. "Ah yes. Do you remember Nara?"

Thel was silent as he tried to recall the name. "She is one of the elder's wives in our keep."

Kalika nodded. "She has been trying to replace me for the past twenty years."

Thel tilted his head. "Replace the Lady of the keep? With whom?"

"Herself. I do not think that she quite understands the responsibility of the job." Thel nodded in understanding. She smirked. "She does now."

He blinked. "You allowed Nara to take her place?"

"Do not worry too much. She is cut out for the job. She is an excellent warrior, a fair teacher, and has children of her own. Her lack of patience may be a problem; having to care for our own, and deal with the paper work, the demands of the elders, the farms, the hunting, the training, the herds..." Kalika's expression darkened. "If she touches my construction plans..."

"You will figure something out." Thel said reassuringly. "What of the children?" He asked with much more interest.

A bright smile lit up Kalika's face as her hands worked up his forearm. "Valina is two years old now. She has not quite figured out how to work those new mandibles of hers, so she 'twaks wike dis.'"

Thel laughed at Kalika's impersonation of their youngest daughter. Kalika chuckled with him. "She is so kind and sweet. I do not know where she gets it from." She sighed as she continued. "Crea inherited her stubbornness and way of thinking from her mother, but like all of

her siblings, she has the hide of her father."

Thel looked up at her with an expression of worry. "They all look like me?"

Kalika lowered his arm with a sigh. (**20**) "Most of them have your bronze color. Others vary with my parents' black and brown hides. Thesa appears to be the only one who inherited your mother's redder skin."

"None of them look like you?" Thel asked as she began to knead her thumb across his palm.

She shook her head. "They all look like you. Crea could be the closest to looking like me. She has my freckles, but even they have your gold color."

Thel exhaled tiredly. "This is going to be an interesting return home."

Kalika did not look away from his arm. "...If we make it home."

Thel stared at her hard. He lifted his other hand and gently took hold of her wrist, making her stop and look up into his eyes. "I will ensure that you make it home, Kalika." He spoke with such a reassuring and soothing tone that she believed him, and she smiled a bright, hopeful smile. Thel snorted in amusement, "Who is without faith now?"

She arched one of her eye ridges as the other fell to express her need to challenge and question that statement. "I never said-"

He silenced her by lifting his other arm and pressing his two index fingers against the front of her muzzle. Her expression relaxed as he leaned forward, again speaking in that deep, coaxing tone. "It is much easier to enjoy the peace while we still have it. Not every minute has to be filled with a word, and not everything has to be a fight."

She did not move nor speak as he removed his two fingers from her snout. He rested both of his hands on top of her biceps, and she crossed her forearms on top of his. They both placed their muzzles against each others', and relaxed. They closed their eyes and each flared their nostrils with a deep, long breath as they listened to the soft churning of the water from the fountains beside them.

Thel awoke feeling quite... at ease for the first time in a long time. The bed was soft and the sheets were comforting beneath him. His cheek was sinking into a warm, rounded pillow. He breathed out heavily and lifted his arm to the other side of the bed where...

Kalika was not there. His eyes flickered open to observe the bare, wrinkled sheets beside him. Was it all... just a dream? Was it a figment of his imagination that his wife had accompanied him on an entire mission? He pressed his palm into the sheets. No. They were warm. He drowsily lifted his head and called her name.

"Kalika?"

He waited for several moments. No answer. Surely, she was not idiotic enough to wander the city by herself. Then again, she had been known to do some pretty unbelievable things before. "Kalika!" He called louder.

Still no answer. Her bag was still sitting on the bench beside the window. Stars streaked past rapidly. High Charity was warping to another system. Thel sat up and looked over at the open closet and its bare shelves.

He cursed loudly and flung himself off of the bed. He hurried up the stairs and up to the door. It pulsed brightly and parted with a hiss to let him through. He walked out in the middle of the tall hall and looked both ways. All he could see were long windows that revealed the swirling masses of stars spiraling past and two minors in full battle armor patrolling. The two Sangheili saw him and stopped with a curious tilt of their heads. They both looked at each other for a brief moment and then back at him. One of them spoke, looking him up and down, "Is... everything alright, Arbiter?"

Thel blinked in confusion at their reactions to his presence. He looked down at himself... and had the sudden urge to smack his palm against his muzzle. Of course, he did not. It was not necessarily an entirely embarrassing situation to walk around nude on Sangheilios. He had done it only once and for a brief moment. (**21**) It was best that members of his own race had seen him rather than an Unggoy or a Jiralhanae. He could walk around the city naked if he really wanted to; no one would stop him, although it was not very favorable.

Thel looked back up at the minors. "Yes. Carry on." He turned and re-entered his room. As soon as the door closed behind him, he made a sort of groaning sound. He much rather preferred to hunt down his wife fully clothed.

After pulling on his suit and equipping himself with the Arbiter's armor, his sword, and his plasma rifle, he set out again. He could not ask information of others. Her presence was meant to be kept secret. What in the name of the gods was she thinking? He flared his nostrils, trying to catch a whiff of her scent.

And so the great warrior, now thankfully clothed, went off on a different kind of adventure.

Arsen walked slowly down one of the hallways on the outermost side of High Charity. The windows here were the tallest and provided quite a breathtaking view of space. The wall on the opposite side of him shimmered and glistened many different colors with the light reflecting off of the many multicolored planets, comets, and stars that raced past. The engines rumbled far below him, and his boots fell lightly on the metal floor.

He had reports to finish, data from his recordings to deliver, and files to organize, no doubt. But, for now, he was taking a moment to reflect on his thoughts. He needed to get away from it all for a while.

He found the need to stop and look out the window. Somewhere, far away, Sanghelios awaited his return.

No. A special someone awaited his return.

It had been a while since he had thought about his own wife until Kalika arrived. Lai'ya was not as cruel or obnoxious as Kalika, but they both had that same fiery spirit. Lai'ya was strict with their children, had gracious respect for the elders, and was overall kind and respectful to all. She was a gentle and caring person, and had the ability to calm him down when he was upset.

He reached for his neck with both hands and unclasped the pendant that his behind his chest plate. He pressed the flat, circular heirloom into his palm and stroked his thumb across the golden symbol on its red metal surface. It was his family's symbol; it had two large circles on the outside, a smaller circle in the middle with a single line rising from its top and other rounded lines perpendicular to it curving and surrounding the middle circle. Dots ran in between the curved lines and the two outer circles. Their mark represented Sanghelios' two suns; the hope and the light to lead the Great Journey.

Lai'ya threw this pendant to him twenty seven years ago right before the doors closed to his drop ship when he departed from Sanghelios. They did not say the goodbyes that they really wanted to say. Arsen wished now that he had told her all of the things that he was grateful to her for. That he was fighting as hard as he could to return to her; alive and well.

He started to walk again, still stroking the cold metal. He could not say that he was envious of the Arbiter. Kalika was not exactly the most happiest or most comforting wife to come home to. He was, for whatever reason, reminded of what he did not have. Kalika was nothing like Lai'ya, but...

Speaking of Kalika.

He looked up and saw her standing in full armor, gazing quietly out the window with her hands held behind her back. She did not look at him or seem to notice him as he approached. He stopped beside her and cleared his throat to make his presence known.

She still did not look away from the window. "Can I help you?"

Arsen exhaled softly. If there was one thing that Lai'ya had taught him, it was patience. "I wanted to apologize for my behavior yesterday. We were all under a lot of stress and my attitude toward you was inexcusable." Perhaps if he showed her kindness, she would learn to soften up a bit.

"Apology accepted." She said coldly and still refused to look at him.

Arsen clenched his mandibles in a frown. Her behavior was far more inexcusable than his. Was she really too proud to apologize in return?

"What is that in your hand?" She asked.

Arsen was silent for a moment. "My wife gave it to me to remind me of her."

Kalika tilted her head slightly and said as if she were ridiculing

him, "How sweet."

Arsen stood silently, staring at her with a dark and concentrated expression. Every time he was around her, he always felt so impatient and angry. Every word out of her mouth made him want to throw something across the room. But, he was determined to remain calm.

"Should you not be filing reports right now, Lieutenant?" She asked acidly.

He exhaled heavily. "What happened to Ila, Kalika?"

Her entire body stiffened and her hands clenched into fists. It was a nice change; she being the one to be thrown off guard this time. She looked at him with widened eyes. "Excuse me?"

"What happened to Ila?" He repeated in the same calm tone.

Her expression warped into one of absolute fury. Her voice rose and she stepped forward, jabbing a finger into his chest, "How do you know her name? Who told you?"

Arsen stared in surprise at how fast her mood had shifted. Her pupils were narrowed dangerously and her muzzle was wrinkled upward. Her lips were curled, baring her teeth. "How much do you know?" She jabbed him again with a harsh growl.

"Would Ila want you to behave like this in her memory?" Arsen asked gently.

"Do NOT speak her name!" Kalika roared.

"Do you not care enough for her to honor her memory?"

Kalika seemed almost like she was possessed by an evil spirit. "ILA WAS EVERYTHING TO ME!" She screamed.

"Then why do you dishonor her?" Arsen pressed on. This reaction was a bit frightening, but if this was what needed to be done to knock some sense into this woman, then let it be done. "There is a much softer and kinder person to you."

"That Kalika died... a very long time ago." She choked. Were her eyes... watering?

"No she did not. I have seen it. When Ral died, you-"

"Leave, Arsen!" Kalika hissed.

He shook his head. "Not until you tell me what-"

"LEAVE!"

When Arsen did not move, Kalika turned to walk away. He reached forward and grabbed her wrist harshly.

Thel rounded the corner at that moment. Kalika spun around and tore her wrist away, "Do not touch me!"

A growl rumbled deep within Thel's chest as he advanced upon them. Kalika walked up to him, and he glowered at Arsen. "What is going on?"

Kalika stood behind him and curled her lip. "I was standing before the window when this soldier came around the corner and attacked me."

Arsen's mandibles flared in disbelief at this lie. He looked up at the Arbiter, who frowned disapprovingly at him. "Arbiter, I would never!"

Thel made a huffing sound in his chest. "Stay away, Arsen. This is your only warning."

Arsen clenched his mandibles, but bowed his head. "Yes, Arbiter. I will return to my quarters now." He coolly lifted his head and did not show anger at Kalika's smirk over Thel's shoulder.

Thel and Kalika walked away side by side as Arsen walked in the opposite direction. As soon as he was far enough away and out of sight, he spun around and punched the wall as hard as he could. Damn that woman! She was impossible. He gave up. He uncurled his fist. His stomach clenched when he saw the pendant was still in his hand. A dark crack zig zagged sown the middle of the symbol. He breathed heavily. "I am sorry, Lai'ya."

"Was that necessary?" Thel asked.

Kalika walked ahead with a hurried pace. "Was what necessary?"

Thel sighed. "I know Arsen did not attack you. I am not dimwitted."

She inhaled deeply. "...Yes. It was necessary." She said stiffly.

Thel stopped walking. "Why?"

Kalika eventually stopped and paused without looking behind herself. She seemed... vulnerable. Weary. Defeated, for once. She wiped her face with her fingers, sighed, and turned. "No one can know the truth, Thel. If the only way to keep that truth hidden is for others to hate me, so be it."

"It must also remain hidden from me?" He asked.

She nodded.

Thel flared his nostrils and walked past her. "I suppose I will just have to trust you."

Kalika silently followed him and lowered her shoulders, lifted her head, and a different kind of aura pulsed from her body as other Sangheili entered the hall ahead of her. Thel lifted his fingers to the base of his neck. "I am here." They both halted and Thel looked questionably over at Kalika. "Yes." He said. Kalika tilted her head curiously at him. "I shall inform her now."

Thel removed his fingers from his neck. "The Prophet of Truth would

like a word with you."

"What does bloaty-head want now?" Kalika asked as she crossed her arms. Thel quirked an eye ridge at her nickname for the Holy Prophet of Truth. "I do not know. I suggest you report to him as soon as possible. I will escort you."

Kalika regained herself with a smirk. "I thought you just said that you trusted me."

They both strode at a fair pace beside each other. "It is not that I do not trust you. I do not trust the soldiers." He wrinkled his muzzle at this statement.

Kalika's eyes widened at this as Thel lead her through the forks and crossroads of High Charity's halls. "Even after what just happened?"

He snorted softly. "I know you."

"And that is supposed to explain everything?" She asked amusedly.

"Precisely."

"Hm."

After traveling through winding corridors and up elevators, Thel halted before a large, ornate door. He turned with a weighted breath. "Please..." He pleaded. "Do not do or say anything ludicrous."

Kalika gave him a mock expression of hurt. "Ludicrous? Me?" The doors parted for her to enter. "Impossible." She smiled and entered the dark room with a confident stride. Thel watched her until the doors closed in front of him.

Rooms on Covenant ships and cities were normally dark. This made it easier on the Sangheili's nocturnal eyes. But this room was much darker than necessary. The lights were awfully dim and no one was in the room. Kalika recognized this to be an observatory deck.

She cautiously walked forward, looking behind herself, up at the ceiling, and around the room. The entire front side of the room was taken up by wide windows. There was no furniture except for a lone vent that blew in cool air.

Kalika turned around. "Thel, you have given me the wrong room." She walked up to the door, but it did not open for her. The lights on its surface flickered red. She could feel the air in the room shift and change. She was not alone.

Just as she whirled around, an invisible force flung her up against the door. She bared her teeth and roared as a Sangheili in black armor appeared before her with one hand curled in a fist against her stomach, and the other hand rising behind him. An energy sword sparked and thrust toward her throat. She more of fell rather than ducked, gasping for breath as she threw a volley of punches into his belly. His knee jerked up and slammed into her muzzle, flinging her once more into the door with a grunt. Her helmet clanged and the

feathers sparked. She was grabbed by the throat and lifted up by one arm as the Elite pried his energy sword out of the door. He growled and twisted his torso back for another swing, but this time she was ready. She grabbed his arm with both hands and swung her legs up on the inside of his arm. Her thighs clenched on either side of his head, her hips twisted, and they were both sent rolling onto the floor. Kalika came out on top and dug her knee into his ribcage as the other leg stretched out and her two toes clenched on the energy sword handle that he had dropped in the fall. She reached down, grabbed the blade, and drove her knee again into his chest. He roared, but when he tried to sit up, his own sword was pointed at his throat.

"Do not... move." She said in a low, silky tone. The Sangheili glared at her as she unarmed his plasma rifle from his thigh.

"Most impressive, 'Vadamai." Some one across the room said. Kalika spun on her knee, making the Sangheili cringe in pain as she aimed her weapon at the Prophet of Truth's head. He rose his hand. "Stand down."

She hesitated, but eventually rose off of the Elite and dropped both of the weapons to the metal floor with a clang. The Sangheili rose, took his weapons, and backed up against the side of the door. The Prophet of Truth nodded to him, and he bowed his head and left the room. Truth waited for the doors to close.

Then he rose his head upon his knuckles. "I did not think that you would be able to pull this mission off. I underestimated you." He said coolly.

She ignored his statement. "What was the purpose of the assassin?"

Truth gave a careless wave of his hand. "I was generous to him. I required someone to test you. He was with the heretics, and so I told him that if he succeeded in killing you, he would be forgiven."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "He would be forgiven?"

Truth nodded. "He will be punished like all of the others."

Kalika arched one of her eye ridges. "Punished?"

"Death." Truth put quite simply.

She nodded. The Prophet tilted his head at her. "Does this bother you?"

"Was it supposed to?"

Truth turned his chair toward the window. "Not necessarily. Why should it not bother you?"

She snorted, "Why worry about something that I can do nothing about?"

The Prophet smiled at this. "You and I are very much alike."

Kalika rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. "How so?"

"We both have our eyes set on a much more important goal. We are so dedicated to the gods' ways that we rid of any who stand in our way, and we have no time to regret or reconsider the past. We must move forward for the sake of the Journey... whether others must be left behind, or not."

"The blind may question our ways. We may be disliked, but it is for the sake to save us all for a much grander and glorious victory." The Prophet of Truth motioned his hands toward the swirling mass of space outside the window. "Salvation awaits us all."

He turned his chair around toward her. "It is-" He stopped and frowned at her. Her head was bowed, her eyes were closed, arms across still, and she breathed slowly. "...Vadamai." Truth said sternly.

Kalika flinched and opened her eyes. "Yes?"

"Were you asleep while I was talking?"

She blinked in disbelief. "I would never."

"I should hope not." Truth said with a lazy blink of his eyes. "Did you follow my instructions?"

She nodded her head. "Thel may be beginning to doubt. It will take a lot of influence to steer him away from his path. He is very loyal to the Covenant." She rose an arm and flicked her hand at the air. "I think you still need to test him."

Truth stared at her for a very long time. "I cannot say that I have met many Sangheili wives, but I do not think that they would be so willing to work against their own loving husbands. Can you be trusted?" He asked quietly.

She shrugged her shoulders. "That is your choice. Whether you benefit or suffer from trusting me is your fault entirely."

Truth thought about this and eventually smiled. "I see." He turned his chair around once more. "We have an opportune moment to test your husband. We have been interrogating the Oracle since yesterday, and it has provided us with information. An index key resides in the Delta Halo system that can begin our Great Journey. We will arrive in the system within a matter of days. You will accompany Thel 'Vadamee once more to the Delta Halo ring. You will have to lower the Shield Wall to enter a Forerunner Library, where you will find the index. Your main goal is to keep an eye on 'Vadamee. Ensure that he is loyal to us for as long as possible. Can you do this?" There was a long moment of silence. Truth turned to Kalika with an expectant quirk of an eyebrow and wrinkle in his forehead.

"What makes you so certain that he will not remain loyal to you?" She asked.

Truth rotated his wrists as he spoke, "I cannot be certain. I can only prepare for what may be. It has come to my attention that the Sangheili's faith, in particular, is being shaken. Who is to say that their leader does not see the same things?"

Kalika tilted her head. "What do you mean?"

Truth looked again toward the stars. "Thel 'Vadamee is a great leader. He has proven himself countless times in this war, as a Supreme Commander, and now as the Arbiter. Any great leader has an open mind to the dark side of any war. It is not likely, but it is possible, for him to... pursue that darker side. Especially being under certain..." He glanced back at Kalika. "...influences. You know how these mind games work, 'Vadamai."

Kalika squinted her eyes. "Indeed. So, perhaps now I should ask you; why trust me? I am Sangheili, not to mention, Thel's wife. No one knows I exist, save a selected few. I could disappear if I wanted to. Leave all of this behind."

Truth nodded his head. "Yes... you are those things, and you most certainly could." He motioned his hand toward her. "And yet, you are still here. The question is... why?"

Kalika stared at him for a very long time before smiling softly. "I suppose we will have to find out."

Thel turned his head as the doors before him opened and Kalika walked out. As soon as the doors closed, her expression shifted into one of irritation. He walked up beside her. "Is everything alright?" He asked as they made their way back to the elevator. The energy swords coming through doors and consistent banging did not go unnoticed.

"He is completely out of his mind." She growled. Two translucent curved doors rotated back to allow them both on the elevator. As they boarded, Kalika continued. "He thinks he has this mind game all figured out."

"And you do?" Thel mused as she pressed one of the buttons on the glowing blue hologram.

"Of course not." She said, observing the translucent wall as the elevator descended. "You can never truly figure out a mind game. That is the point of it all."

"Then how do you win?" Thel asked, deciding to go along with her.

Kalika sighed. "The only way to win a mind game is not to play at all. Truth does not know that."

"But you are still playing."

Kalika looked up at him. "Well, you have to know when to win." She said as the elevator slowed to a stop. The doors curved back with a hiss. "Besides..." Kalika said with a smile as they exited. "...This game is just getting started."

****Author's Notes****

20) It is a Sangheili custom for their children not to know who their father is. This prevents the children from being favored according to their father's status.

21) When Thel first became Kaidon, three assassins were sent to kill him. Thel defeated them all, but bluffed to the elders that he had left one alive, and undressed himself before them to show that he had not been harmed. Thel told the elders that the assassin had informed him who had sent the assassins, making the one guilty elder, Koida, seem uncomfortable. Thel killed him and ordered his line to leave by sunrise or meet the same fate.

9. Log 08

CONSORT

of the

HERETIC

Created By Cyber and Zmori

Written by Zmori

Edited by ShoopWoop17

/Access Data Logs

2 November, Year 2552

Covenant Holy City, High Charity

Sanctum of the Hierarchs

5:36 Hours

CONNECTING...

LOG 08

"You summoned me?" Kalika called as she emerged into the shadows of the Sanctum of the Hierarchs. There was a heavy metal plating covering the tall windows, making the room very dark. There was only one source of light coming from the western side of the room. It was the light of a bright blue holographic screen taking up the entire wall, casting its rays, gently glowing on the metal floor. The silhouettes of two gravity thrones cast tall black shadows on the ground.

She recognized the silky voice of the Prophet of Truth echo first, "We thought you would like to see this. Come forth, Lady 'Vadamai."

Kalika arched an eye-ridge at the sound of her formal title, and first looked around the room cautiously for any warnings of another ambush. Eventually, she slowly walked forward and stood in between the two Prophets. They levitated their chairs back on either sides of the screen as if they had rehearsed this before her arrival.

The screen blinked for a moment. In the corner, she read:

"21 October, Year 2552

Covenant Holy City, High Charity

10:36 Hours

Accessing Recording From Database..."

"You place your top secret recordings on a database?"

Mercy's voice rattled forth, "It allows those who are curious to easily... happen upon them."

The screen blinked, and once more, Kalika watched Thel 'Vadamee walk the pier in his golden armor, dignifying his previous rank as Supreme Commander. She had seen this before. He walked up to the edge. Again, she heard his words, "If they came to hear me beg... they will be disappointed."

"Are you sure?"

The pillars beside him glowed and thrummed with power. The arcs of plasma, warm with the orange color of Sanghelios' suns, lashed across Thel's arms hungrily as he let forth an outcry. The screen flickered white for a moment, and then the Brutes were removing his armor. Tartarus hefted the Mark of Shame brand up onto his thick arms and rammed it into Thel's chest. Kalika watched without blinking or moving as Thel's body was wracked with burning pain and his expression became wrought with suffering.

The screen turned blue again.

"21 October, Year 2552

Covenant Drop Ship Flying Over Mining Facility

15:50 Hours

Accessing Recording From Database..."

There was a brief, yet exhilarating view of a Phantom flying past the debris of the destroyed Halo, Installation 04.

"When we joined the Covenant, we took an oath!"

Kalika understood what was going on. She watched as the camera angle shifted each time to ensure that she was not seen. Every part relating to Kalika was muted, cut out, and deleted while the rest of the Elites stood there proudly, looking awesome.

"I do not need to see this." Kalika said softly. At one point during Rtas' speech, the camera followed his back, hiding Kalika in front of him.

"And continue our march for Glorious Salvation!" Rtas said.

The screen froze with Rtas' face still on screen; his green eyes narrowed, his silver armor brightly lit, and his two stumps of torn pink flesh where mandibles should have been were spread in mid-sentence.

"What is the purpose of showing this to me?" Kalika asked.

"To discourage any further attempts to call for help."

Now, this confused her. "...What do you mean?"

Suddenly, on the other side of the room, a piston hissed and glowed on the floor. All three turned toward the cylindrical column slowly rising from the floor. Kalika followed the Prophets to the side of the column as Truth spoke, "No one can track you, and there is no possibility for you to be found on High Charity's histories. They have all been destroyed."

She snorted, "I was led to believe that you required the Council's approval before destroying data."

Truth ignored her. "I did not think that you were one who called for the aide of others. Again, I have misjudged you. I would also have been led to believe that you would use a more common signal. I did not consider the use of a radio signal, or much less..."

The column reached the top of the ceiling, and in the middle of it, levitating above a risen platform, was the monitor of Installation 04, 343 Guilty Spark. "...an Oracle."

Kalika tilted her head at the monitor. It was rolled over, as if it had been neutralized, yet it still lit up the room with its pulsing blue light. "I did not call for help." She said instead of the question of the Oracle's state.

"Oracle." Truth said. "Relay your last encounter with Kalika 'Vadamai.'"

A slanted cylinder slowly rotated beside the column beside them until its base was directly over the monitor. There was a moments pause as the AI of the ship connected to the Oracle, and the speakers came to life with Guilty Spark's humming. There was another pause.

Kalika heard her own voice, "Code name."

Guilty Spark replied, "Preparing data log. Code name required for access."

"Adversity."

One of the Prophets must have been pressing buttons on their chair, because the recording stopped automatically. The Prophet of Truth turned to Kalika with his fingers folded under his bristly chin. "What is code name Adversity? What is X5?" He leaned forward ever more slightly. "Who are you contacting?"

She shook her head. "That is not me. I am not contacting anyone. The monitor could have generated that recording easily, or your Oracle made a mistake."

Truth's lips scrunched up, causing his skin to wrinkle across his muzzle as he spoke in a very loathsome tone, "Do you honestly think that we would believe these childish lies? We have evidence of your collaboration with the Oracle on camera, and placing a radio device elsewhere on the Gas Mine. Speaking of which, that radio signal will not reach Sanghelios for at least fifty years. And with the

destruction of the mining facility, it cannot be traced."

A knowing smile crept across Kalika's cheeks. "Did you not say, Prophet, that there was no evidence of my existence? It was destroyed... was it not?"

Truth suddenly became very silent and he stared at her with an expression of slight surprise and agitation. Mercy clenched his palms on his chair behind her as she turned to Truth.

"With... respect, Holy Prophets, there is evidence of my existence somewhere on this ship. And somewhere, at some time, the truth will be uncovered by those who seek it."

The white Prophet hovered his chair around Kalika and sat beside Truth. "How dare you speak to the Holy Prophets of the Covenant with such rancid tone?!"

She curled her lip at the Prophet of Mercy. "You may have fancier hats and chairs, Prophets, but we are all equal in this trial of war. If I truly wished for escape, I would have done so long ago."

Truth regained his composure. "Ah, yes. And why do you continue to aide us? Why do you not escape now? There must be something here you truly care about, here, if you are so insistent to stay. Perhaps it is for the very same reason that you left Sanghelios and came to High Charity in the first place."

It was Kalika's turn to be silent. She gave him no expression except for the icy cold glare from her narrowed eyes as Truth continued, "You can not leave without your dear husband, can you? You are bound to him. Perhaps you are not so unpredictable and heartless as you try so desperately to make everyone believe you are. Perhaps... if we were to free you?"

Her pupils narrowed into slits dangerously. "You would not kill the Arbiter."

"The Arbiter only has so many uses left. We easily killed of the Prophet of Regret, who carried your precious evidence. Why not the Arbiter?"

She blinked in surprise. "That is why you pulled 'Vadumee's forces back and allowed Regret to be killed? To destroy my evidence? Because of me?"

Mercy spoke now, "He had found a great prize, and he was not needed anymore. We can throw the Arbiter away just as easily. The Great Journey waits for no one."

"Not even you. Do not forget your place, 'Vadamai." Truth said softly.

The metal plating on the windows clicked softly, and with a low rumble, they slowly began to pull up. Light streamed in from the stars of space, and the room was lit up with soft white lights on the curved ceiling. The screen on the western wall flickered off, accompanied by a soft beep. When the metal plating pulled up all the way, Kalika found herself staring at a breathtaking view of the Delta Halo. Regret's prize. Its surface was blotted with swirling white

clouds, and bodies of water hid beneath them. Mountains and plains spread across the silver metal of the ring. The Halo was slanted away from the window so that they could only see the metal bottom. Blue markings were engraved into the silver surface; artwork of the Forerunners.

"You wish for me to accompany the Arbiter again. What is our objective?"

"You shall learn in the coming time." Mercy said as the doors parted behind them. Kalika turned and looked up at Rtas 'Vadumee. Arsen, along with another of Rtas' lieutenants, followed behind him.

Truth motioned Kalika away toward the left of the room. She acknowledged and made her way toward the west wall as Rtas and his men stood before the Prophets and the majestic view of the Halo ring.

"Thank you for arriving so early, Commander." Truth said to him as he bowed his head in salutation. "We have many things to discuss."

"What is your will, Holy One?" 'Vadumee asked.

"You will no longer be accompanying the Arbiter. 'Vadamai will take your place instead."

All three of the Elites looked over at her where she was absentmindedly picking at her gloves. Rtas slowly turned his head toward Truth. "Are you sure that this is... a wise decision?"

"We have put much thought into this, Commander. You and your Elites are to be put to much better use. While the Arbiter and his Lady scout the Library for the Sacred Icon, you and your Elites will take positions elsewhere around the Library to hold off the Flood forces."

Rtas snorted, "The Flood is here as well?"

Mercy nodded, "Yes. They seek to halt our Great Journey. Without the Sacred Icon, we cannot begin the Journey. This is why we require you to hold the Flood off as the Arbiter and his consort seek the Icon."

"...Alone?" Rtas asked with a quizzical arch of his eye-ridge.

Truth tilted his head. "Is there an issue with this?"

Kalika clenched her jaws tightly together to repress her laughter.

"No, Hierarch."

"Very well." Truth pressed a small blue button on the arm of his chair. "I have one last thing to inform you of."

The doors at the back of the circular room parted with a combination of hisses. All eyes turned to the two tall Jiralhanae walking forth with their heavily armored boots slamming down into the ground. They wore the Honor Guards' glowing black and orange armor and their

bright red flags on their shoulders. Their helmets bore two orange wings arcing up from their heads like horns, and their pole arms flashed with their three spokes pointed toward the ceiling.

"What is this?" Rtas asked with a disbelieving, wide-eyed glare.

Kalika seemed more amused than surprised, "You recommissioned the guard?"

Truth lifted his chin as the Special Operations Commander turned to look at him once again. "This is unprecedented. Unacceptable."

Kalika turned her head as the doors parted once more to make way for the Arbiter.

"A hierarch is dead, Commander." Truth replied coolly.

"His murderer was within our grasp! If you had not withdrawn our Phantoms-

"Are you questioning my decision?" Truth asked in a dangerous tone with a slight crane of his neck.

Rtas shook his head and spread his palm slightly, "No, Holy One! I only wish to express my concern that the Brutes-

Again, Truth cut him off and lifted his hand. "Recommissioning the guard was a radical step." He motioned with a wave of his hand and a lazy blink of his grey eyes. "But recent events have made it abundantly clear that the Elites can no longer guarantee our safety." He shook his head side to side.

Rtas flared his nostrils, but bowed his head in submission. "I shall relay your... _decision_... to the Council."

The black armored Elites followed their Commander toward the back of the room. The Arbiter watched them, and as they passed, Rtas gave a respectful nod to him. Thel returned it, and to his left, Kalika bowed her head to him as well. His eyes met hers for a brief moment.

She motioned her muzzle toward the Prophet of Truth as he sighed tiredly. The Arbiter looked up at the holy hierarch and walked forth before him. "Politics." Truth said wearily. "How tiresome." The San'Shyuum's milky grey eyes met the Arbiter's gold. "Do you know, Arbiter, the Elites have threatened to resign? _To quit the High Council?_" He said this last sentence with a tone of disbelief. He gave a loll of his wrists to accompany his next statement mockingly, "Because of this... _exchange of hats_"

Thel respectfully but pointedly said, "_We_ have always been your protectors."

"These are trying times for all of us."

Mercy's head swayed with his heavy crown. "Even as the human's annihilation filled us with satisfaction, the loss of one of the Sacred Rings wracked our hearts with grief!"

Truth put his hand up, "Putting aside our sorrow, we renewed our faith in the Prophecy that other rings would be found." He pulled his chair back to allow a better view of the beautiful Halo ring. "And see how our faith has been rewarded!"

Mercy rose both of his arms as Thel took in the view. "Halo... Its divine wind will rush through the stars, propelling all who are worthy along the path to Salvation!"

Truth stroked at the brown prickly spines on his chin. "But how to start this process?"

Mercy and Truth's chairs levitated over to the pillar, where the Oracle still floated and pulsed its bright blue lights, as if it had a heart beating a living pulse. The Arbiter followed them to the center of the room as Truth continued. "For ages, we searched for one who might unlock the secrets of the rings – an Oracle. And with your help, we found it."

The elderly white San 'Shyuum revolved his chair around the pillar. "With appropriate humility, we plied the Oracle with questions and it, with clarity and grace, has shown us the key!"

Kalika scoffed softly at this.

"You will journey to the surface of the ring and retrieve this Sacred Icon." Truth said. "With it, we shall fulfill our promise."

Mercy let up a joyous outcry, "Salvation for all!"

Truth joined him, "And begin the Great Journey!"

The Arbiter was silent for a moment. He looked up at the Oracle as Kalika approached his side. "I am to accompany you to the Library." She said softly.

Thel looked down at her and asked with a slightly surprised tone, "Why?"

Kalika's eyes narrowed mockingly. "_It is the will of the Prophets_."

He turned his questionable gaze toward the Hierarchs. Truth nodded, "She will accompany you to the Library. 'Vadumee's forces will fight to clear as much of a path as they can through the Flood."

Mercy waved his hand, "Go now, Arbiter. The ships will leave within the coming hour. 'Vadumee will follow."

The Arbiter bowed his head, his silver helmet glinting in the blue light of the Oracle's eye. "I shall see it done, Hierarchs."

Kalika followed Thel out of the room, casting one last glance back at the Prophet of Truth who stared calmly back at her.

As the ornament doors closed behind her with a low booming sound, she quickened her pace to walk along side him. Jiralhanae eyed them in a disapproving fashion as they walked past.

"This new change of ranks is... unsettling." Thel admitted quietly, gazing at the dim shadows cast by the large floating pillars along either side of them.

"This entire situation is unsettling." Kalika replied in the same hushed tone, keeping her eyes forward and her chins high. Jiralhanae snorted and snarled at each other impatiently, their black eyes observing them without the mind of proper judgment.

After a long silent walk through the corridors of High Charity, they entered one of its many large hangars.

Two rows of six total Phantoms sat evenly adjacent from each other, casting shadows in almost every direction. The lights were not very bright, but this was no challenge for the reptilian races of the Covenant. Kalika looked up to observe the high ceiling as Thel gazed upon the many Sangheili, Unggoy, and Kig-Yar running about. Thel put his arm out in front of Kalika to stop her. She looked back down, only to look back up at the two Mgalekgolo thundering past, side by side in front of them.

"There you are, brother." A voice called from beneath a Phantom. The Arbiter bowed his head as he approached Rtas. Kalika kept her distance as the two old friends conversed. Arsen walked in and out of the Phantom, giving orders and preparing the ships for flying into battle.

"YOU!" A growling voice yelled somewhere behind her. She turned in confusion with an irritated expression, but all of a sudden, some one grabbed her and slammed her down hard into the ground. Her world went spinning for a moment and she suddenly forgot how to breathe. A Sangheili pinned her down with both of his strong hands groping at her throat.

Thel spun around. Rtas and he both looked over in surprise as Kalika slowly regained her senses. Thel was the first to respond. He curled his lip and let forth a thunderous growl of warning before charging forward. He grabbed the male harshly by the scruff on the nape of his neck. The Arbiter was so filled with rage that he threw the Sangheili all the way to the door that he had recently walked through.

Thel stood over Kalika as the Sangheili shook his head and rose to his feet.

"An Honor Guard?" Rtas asked in disbelief, standing by Thel's side. Indeed, the Elite still wore the black and orange armor of the Honor Guard, but his helmet was missing.

Kalika shoved past both of them and charged at the Honor Guard.

"KALIKA!" Thel roared and reached to grab her, but of course, she was much too fast. Rtas and Thel both ran forward to follow her.

The Honor Guard roared and flashed his teeth, receiving many alarmed looks from around the hangar. Yanme'e chattered excitedly above them. As Kalika drew closer, he threw the first punch. She immediately ducked and lashed out with a vicious volley of punches to his stomach. He came forward with his other arm and grabbed the feathers on her helmet. Before he could yank back, the Arbiter grabbed her

around the waist and pulled her away. Her helmet came off and clattered to the ground. The Honor Guard lashed out with an uppercut before he, too, was grabbed and pulled back by Arsen and his men. Kalika's head was kicked back by the nasty blow, and she roared as pain engulfed her cheek and the front of her mandibles.

"You bring nothing but dishonor to the Sangheili, Kalika 'Vadamai!" The Honor Guard shouted as Rtas, Arsen, and a third Sangheili in black armor struggled to hold him back.

"Stand down!" Rtas commanded.

"Release me, Thel!" Kalika hissed as she squirmed against his iron grasp. He had one arm wrapped across her chest and biceps with his hand cupping the side of her face. The other arm trapped her stomach and forearms, gripping her hip harshly to prevent movement.

"If you had not come, the Elites would still be the Honor Guard of the Covenant!" The Sangheili warrior continued.

"Silence!" Rtas roared.

"If you had not come, my brothers would still be alive!"

"Come then, Sor 'Rolamee!" Kalika shouted, kicking her legs violently. "Come take back your brothers' blood! (**22**)"

Sor bellowed and wrenched himself free of the others' grips.

"Thel, this is my fight!" She struggled more, and eventually, Thel seeing the coming enemy, released her to defend herself. Like a Helioskrill recognizing the presence of its prey, she broke free of his grasp and bounded forth with clenched fists.

She leaped up into the air, twisting her body and extending her leg as Sor crouched down. He crossed his arms over his head just before Kalika's heel bore into it. He stood very quickly, shoving her leg up and throwing her off balance. She fell back with a grunt as Sor quickly advanced. She rolled back over her shoulder and stood as Sor lashed out with a kick toward her. She twisted her body, brought her fists up, and dodged the kick as she swung her knee up in between his legs. (**23**)

Sor's entire body stiffened and a pained roar escaped his maw. He moved to bend over and hug his abdomen, but Kalika wouldn't let him. She pounded his stomach again and again with her armored gloves.

He began to stumble back as if he were in a daze. Kalika yelled as she threw a last heavy punch below his armored chest plate. Sor staggered again, slowly recovering. She walked forward for a moment, and then ran. Jumping into the air, she swung around and kicked him hard in his belly.

Sor fell back onto the ground with a cry of pain as Rtas shook his head. Thel looked on with an unreadable expression on his face; an expression he used often, quite recently. Kalika began to walk forward again. "Your brothers' blood still calls to be reclaimed, Honor Guard." She said as she panted heavily.

Sor pulled his plasma rifle swiftly from his thigh, aiming it at her

unguarded head. She stopped immediately as Sor, too, panted and spoke in a loathsome tone, "No, _my Lady_... It is _my _blood that calls to be reclaimed now."

"What honor is there in this, 'Rolamee?" She asked with her often used icy glare.

"You forget, 'Vadamai. You are not Sangheili in my eyes. Consort of the heretic, or not."

His last sentences seemed to have bound the entire room in such an unsettling fog of silence that none dared to disturb it. For a long period of time, Kalika stared at the tip of his gun. The right side of her face was bleeding from his first uppercut. Her mandibles flared with heavy breaths that cleared away the thick fog of silence.

"How..." She began, speaking softly with an amused tone.

"..._valiant of you_."

With great speed, she swung her foot with an outside kick to his hand, sending the rifle flying. She kept his wrist in between her two toes and pinned his arm down across his chest. Sor attempted to grab her throat, but she craned her long neck and clamped her powerful jaws around his wrist. As her teeth ground into his suit, she twisted her other leg and drove her knee into the soft spot unguarded by armor directly beneath the middle of his ribcage. He cried out, trying to pry his wrist free as Kalika growled ferociously.

She leaned forward and clenched both hands around his throat, driving her knee deeper. He wrenched his wrist free, and with a powerful grip, he also wrapped his hand around her throat.

Sor roared, his black eyes ablaze with anger. Kalika drew one arm away from his throat slowly behind herself.

With a shriek of a roar, Kalika bared her pointed teeth and dug her sharp claws into his right eye. He immediately released her throat and frantically reached for his eye as he bellowed a cry of absolute suffering. Kalika dug her claws deep into his eye socket, refusing to release him as he grabbed at her arm.

But the more he tried to push her off or pull her away, the harsher she held on, enticing more agonizing screams of pain from the Honor Guard.

She eventually removed her bloody claws with a yank as she leaned down very closely toward his inner ear. She hissed silently, "Is the view still nice?"

She stood and disturbed him no more. Many pairs of eyes followed her across the room as she approached the Arbiter, who stared at her with an expression of slight disturbance.

One of the newer, younger recruits, a minor, turned away from the scene and lost a little of his latest meal.

"Come, Arbiter." Kalika said as she strode calmly toward the blue

beams of light beneath the Phantoms. "We have a mission, do we not?"

Thel looked back at Sor, who still moaned on the floor. Rtas pressed two fingers to his shoulder to activate his communications. Shortly after, he approached Thel hesitantly and shook his head. "The Huragok (**24**) are on their way. Let us be off, Arbiter."

Thel leaned down and lifted Kalika's helmet from the floor. He looked up at the large gathering of Covenant soldiers watching him. He hesitated for a moment before following Rtas toward the Phantom.

* * *

><p>"I am sorry to disturb you, Holy One." The High Chieftain's voice came muffled through the communications device on the Prophet of Truth's chair.<p>

"What troubles you, Tartarus?" Truth asked quietly, gazing out at the blinking stars from the observatory deck.

"An Honor Guard attacked the female in the hangar. Many have seen the fight and know of her existence. How would you like for me to proceed?"

The Prophet of Truth was silent for a long time as he calmly observed the intricate designs of the Delta Halo ring.

"Once you have obtained the Sacred Icon..." He said, lost in thought for a moment.

He blinked casually, "Kill her. Kill all of the Elites."

"It shall be done, Holy Hierarch."

Author's Notes

22) In Sangheili society, blood is honor. The idea of losing blood is also a means of losing honor. This is why doctors are looked down upon, especially the patients who go to them.

23) Due to an obvious differentiation between human and Sangheili anatomy, a kick in between the legs is not as serious to a Sangheili male as it is to a human. However, it is still considered a sensitive and weaker spot.

24) Huragok, or more commonly known as Engineers, are another Covenant species that are more specialized in repairing not only machines, but as well as healing fatal wounds.

10. Log 09

CONSORT

of the

HERETIC

Created By Cyber and Zmori

Written by Zmori

Edited by ShoopWoop17

/Access Data Logs

2 November, Year 2552

Covenant Ship Approaching Delta Halo

7:28 Hours

CONNECTING...

LOG 09

The soft whining of the Phantom's engines was the only sound that rumbled beneath their feet. Thel stared blankly at the floor. His consort stood against the wall opposite of him, gazing at him thoughtfully. A lone Kig-Yar and two Unggoy rode with them. Their bodies shifted with the gentle turbulence as the Phantom entered the atmosphere of the Delta Halo.

"I am curious..." Kalika mused, loud enough for the others to hear. "...Will the human who killed Regret be here as well?"

Thel's eyes suddenly became focused as he looked up at her with a wide stare, "It was a human who killed Regret?"

She gave him a nod. After a few moments, Thel's eyes grew distant once more. She could see him becoming wrapped up and lost within a tangled web of thoughts.

The Arbiter flinched when his communications suddenly became live. Tartarus spoke in an excessively gruff voice. "You each understand your mission?"

"Yes, Chieftain." The Arbiter replied, staring at the floor again.

Tartarus snorted, "Once the shield is down, you will head straight for the Library. I do not wish to keep the Hierarchs waiting."

There was a pause before Thel slowly rose his head again. "The human who killed the Prophet of Regret... who was it?"

Kalika watched his face closely with Tartarus' next words, "Who do you think?"

Thel turned his head sharply, "The demon is here?"

The Jiralhanae Chieftain snarled at the mention of his name. "Why? Looking for a little payback?"

Thel lifted his carbine into both of his hands, loading it as they approached their destination, "Retrieving the Icon is my only concern."

Tartarus chuckled in amusement and said sarcastically, "Of

course."

Thel rose the carbine over his shoulder and allowed it to latch onto the gravity lock on his back. Kalika sniffed the air curiously, "Master Chief, they call him?"

The Arbiter nodded. "The demon who destroyed the first Halo."

She smiled to him, "I would like to meet this demon."

Thel almost glared at her, "I would as well..." He pulled on the top part of his plasma pistol to allow it to pump its plasma throughout the weapon. "...With nothing but the tip of my gun."

Kalika's eyes widened and her breath shivered softly with mirth, "Is that so?"

"I will not go out of my way to seek revenge. However, if the gods should be generous enough to give me the chance... I will not hesitate to pull the trigger."

Kalika looked down when the floor lit up, acknowledging that they should prepare to drop off. She said, "Do not chew your mandibles off." (**25**)

Thel approached the bright glowing blue circle on the floor as the Phantom slowed to a stop. He offered his hand, "My Lady."

Kalika bowed her head and walked past him, standing in the middle of the circle. Gravity began to pull down on her body as she was engulfed in bright blue light. There was a slight jerk of the floor, and she descended swiftly to the ground below the Phantom.

She landed with bent knees, one palm to the platform, and the other wrapped around her sword. The air was freezing. Flurries of silver snow fluttered through the lazy wind. Kalika had landed on a platform, and gazed into an open room with upward slants from the floor leading up into it. She was in the entrance of the Shield Wall. Looking up, she could see the towering bright metal wall and the blue domed plasma shield that protected the library. Looking along either side, the wall stretched on forever, and beneath that was a frightening, dark drop.

After her swift observation she ran forward up the slopes into the open room. The Kig-Yar and two Unggoy were the next to land. They waddled along behind her.

Thel was the last. He sniffed at the cold air as the Phantom departed, and with it, the sound of its transmuted-plasma powered engines. It was replaced with a low whirring sound directly beneath him. He frowned and turned, aiming his carbine at the source of the alien sound.

A large flying machine slowly approached him. Two long legs hung from its rounded body. A single blue eye observed him passively as its legs stretched out toward him.

Thel had no idea if it was friendly or not, but he let off a warning shot. A bright spark of green light jerked from the carbine with a loud pop. Then another. And another. It continued to advance with

outstretched legs.

The Phantom swung back around and fired its own cannons upon the large machine. The red bolts knocked the machine forward, and it swerved around with its own weapons drawn. The Phantom jerked away and flew rapidly down the side of the wall, drawing the machine's attention away. As Thel stared after them, he heard through his communications, "Lower the shield, Arbiter! I'll pick you up when you've finished."

Thel turned and proceeded to follow Kalika and his allies. Pillars supported the interior of the room, and crates were randomly placed across the floor. A high pitched squealing sound came from one of the eastern walls. He turned in confusion and stared at the end of a glowing white tube at the top of the furthest wall. His eyes narrowed and he lifted his carbine into his arms.

Out of the tube came a Sentinel; a small flying machine with metal wings sticking out behind it from its thin body and a single blue eye gleaming on its front. It turned, saw him, and fired a bright orange beam directly at his position.

He rolled to his right over his shoulder, coming up onto his knee and firing his carbine at the Sentinel as it tried to aim its beam again. A recognizable humming of plasma rifles could be heard to his far left. The tube behind the Sentinel blew up, sending the flying machine forward. It tucked its wings in and went into a protective mode, sitting quietly and passively. Thel advanced, firing his carbine at the silver metal machine. It eventually gave a whine and its eye flickered off. Smoke spiraled from its back.

He heard Kalika yell, "Destroy the tubes!"

He followed the sound of her voice to the other side of the room. After coming around one of the many tall pillars, he found himself looking at a destroyed Sentinel on the floor. The Kig-Yar and two grunts were firing their weapons at a white glowing tube in the wall, not unlike the one that the Sentinel had emerged from. After a long volley of shooting, the tube overheated and exploded. As dark smoke unfurled from the mouth of the structure, Thel understood, "The tubes must lead to the Sentinel Factory."

"There is no doubt that they are dispersed through out the entire wall." Kalika said, exchanging her pistol for two Plasma Rifles from the weapons pod that was dropped by the Phantom.

"Stay alert, and destroy the factories before targeting any Sentinels unless it is absolutely necessary." The Arbiter commanded as he approached the wall blocking his path to advance to the shield generators. He looked across the silver metal of the wall, brushing the tips of his four fingers across its cool, smooth surface.

"How do we-"

A sudden bang and a hiss to his left caused him to flinch and look up sharply. A tall, thick piston rose from the floor, revealing what seemed to be some sort of ventilation system. Cool air blew up from the dark depths.

"I did not think that would work." Kalika mused, lowering her plasma

rifle.

Thel approached with a disapproving flicker of his bare mandibles.
"That is a Forerunner relic!"

"A stubborn one, at that." She motioned the rifle toward the shaft. Thel stared at her for a good five seconds, and proceeded to the edge. Shifting his carbine onto his back, he leaped up into the air and began to rapidly descend into the depths of the Shield Wall.

* * *

><p>An icy cold sensation had crept around Commander 'Vadumee's innards, making him feel stiff, slightly cranky, and a little more paranoid than usual. Something about this entire mission just didn't seem right. The Prophets hadn't sent enough troops for this kind of mission, especially for the Sacred Icon. With the Brutes having a higher standing than the Elites, tables had been turned and everything seemed... without balance.<p>

He released a soft, yet shaky breath. The screens rattled with turbulence as the Phantom stroked its tail across the atmosphere of the Halo ring. Small blue and orange sparks flickered across the Phantom's curved nose as the dark purple ship descended toward the white and blue surface ahead of them.

He turned and stepped out of the cabin, proceeding into the back room. His men, all in line, in black armor, with the same desolate expression, looked up at him. The ship itself had begun to shiver beneath their feet.

These soldiers would not die without knowing their honor.

With a mighty bellow, Rtas called upon them, "WARRIORS OF THE COVENANT!"

The soldiers responded to his energy. They pounded their heavy boots on the floor and the sound vibrated through the walls and their bodies.

"WHEN WE JOINED THE COVENANT, WE TOOK AN OATH!"

"ACCORDING TO OUR STATION, ALL WITHOUT EXCEPTION!"

Rtas turned and looked each Sangheili in the eyes, "ON THE BLOOD... OF OUR FATHERS!"

A roar was let up.

"ON THE BLOOD OF OUR SONS!"

Boots pounded the floor once again. Energy was high and their blood curdled as their hearts began to beat as one. The Phantom groaned and shuddered with the worst of the turbulence.

Rtas continued to walk across the walkway and turned dramatically with a fist striking the air. "WE SWORE TO UPHOLD THE COVENANT!"

Sharp teeth flashed and lips curled, "EVEN TO OUR DYING BREATH!"

A thunderous, challenging growl rippled through 'Vadumee's throat, "THE PARASITE THREATENS US ONCE MORE! THE SANGHEILI'S HONOR IS THREATENED ONCE AGAIN! OUR LIVES ARE THREATENED! BUT WILL THE SANGHEILI BOW?!"

A mighty roar rose up amongst the troop. 'Vadumee glared Arsen directly in the eye, "WILL THE SANGHEILI BOW?!"

Arsen, like the others, beat his fist against his chest plate repeatedly and roared ferociously, "WE WILL GRIND THEM INTO DUST!"

The Phantom was no longer shuddering because of the turbulence. The power and will to fight reverberated throughout the ship as it began to near the ground. The rings on the floor began to pulse bright blue, indicating that the time was near.

Rtas lifted his arms, and the room instantly fell silent. There was a very long moment of silence as the Spec Ops Commander looked each warrior in the eye. He said without yelling, but still with the same ferocity as before, "My Brothers..."

He walked forward, pulling his sword hilt away from his right thigh. He faced the drop ship's doors, but looked over his left shoulder, "We will not bow."

He walked forward as the ship came to a stop. "NOT ON THIS DAY!"

The warriors roared with spread mandibles, eyes wide, and necks craned. Again, came the pounding of their feet and the beating of their chests. 'Vadumee walked swiftly around the ship. "AND CONTINUE-!" His sword hissed and spat scathingly for blood as its white-blue spokes rose from the silver hilt. "-OUR MARCH-!" He roared at the top of his lungs, and his men responded with gaping maws and ready weapons.

The floors beneath them slid underneath the circles. "-TO GLORIOUS SALVATION!"

The Sangheili Stealth troop dropped down, led by their Commander. As soon as they left the ship, their faces were lashed with cold winds and bit by icy snow. Their shields and suits worked fast to help their bodies adjust comfortably to the temperatures.

The Commander checked his radar in the corner of his HUD lenses. All yellow markers. (**26**) He exhaled slowly as the freezing air was pressed out of his suit. Soft silvery wisps spouted from their nostrils and jaws as they all stood and observed their surroundings.

A large slope rose up before them, and to their left was the towering grey Shield Wall. The skies were dark and the thick clouds were sagging low with the heavy snow storm.

The Stealth troop's black armor would not aide them here in the white snow. Rtas' silver armor, however, easily blended with the terrain. He would use this to the troop's advantage.

He let forth another spout of cloud from his nose and butted his

muzzle toward the rising slope. "Advance up the mountain, Sangheili!" He called.

He and his twelve warriors began to long trek up the icy, snow-capped mountain in their search to rid of the Flood infestation.

* * *

><p>Fuc.<p>

Fuc was his name.

The two Tall Ones were arguing again. The gray-blue Tall One in gold metal was fighting _spewers_ and the brown Tall One was shooting Sentinels.

They were standing on a metal floor, and triangular archways were placed evenly several feet away from each other down a dark hallway. A bright teal beam crackled and hummed above the archways and progressed through a hole into another room. The Tall Ones had been tracing this beam, believing that it led to a shield generator.

Fuc's communications crackled with Chieftain Tartarus' gruff voice, "You're getting close to one of the shield generators. Many of my Brutes have fallen in attempt to take it down. Let's see if you fail better."

Encouraging. Fuc began to run toward the corner of a pillar and placed his hands on the cold metal. Climbing was of no issue to an Unggoy's rough hands and thick nails. He swiftly made his way up, clinging onto bolts and thrusting himself toward the top to get a better view and aim. Just as he scrambled on top of a small platform, he found himself face to face with a spewer. Its eyes glinted in the shadows, and a high pitched wail arose from Fuc's throat. The spewer lashed out with its massive hand, flinging Fuc through the air. All of a sudden he was being tossed and turned through a claustrophobic system of tubes.

His entire body was being thrust against a plastic surface, and the world was flashing by with bright white lights.

The next thing he knew, he was hugging the head of a Sentinel. Thank the Forerunners, the world had stopped jerking around. He blinked his black beady eyes and looked around himself.

He was no longer in a system of tubes. He was looking out into a colossus room. It was so huge that he couldn't see the other end of the room. The wide walls were dimly lit, and...

Fuc squealed in horror. There was no floor beneath him. Only a very dark void gaped beneath his dangling feet. He clung and grasped the Sentinel's head. His breathing became very rapid and loud in his methane-mask. (**27**)

The little Unggoy didn't seem to realize that he was relying on a Sentinel to save his life. All he seemed to care about was the fact that if he let go, he wouldn't have any control over whether or not he went _ker-splat_! He said a curse to the Yanme'e, wherever they may be. He also didn't seem to notice the thousands upon thousands of

Sentinels flying into large white tubes on the opposite walls. A few of the tubes had red lights over them, while others were blinking blue or purple.

The Sentinel that he was holding onto didn't care for the Unggoy's presence. It was being held by an iron arm, and its eye was currently offline. It suddenly lurched forward into a white tube. Fuc closed his eyes as a sharp force seemed to suck his belly into his own body, making him feel like he needed to wretch. After a few moments, the Sentinel slowed and they entered a larger room. The Sentinel's light flickered blue, blinding Fuc. The silver machine gave a jerk, flinging the Unggoy onto the ground.

Fuc groaned and began to sit up, blinking and whining in his high-pitched voice. He looked up... and his heart leaped up into his throat.

It was no Sentinel that aimed its weapons at him. It was a larger machine with a rounded body and two long arms unfolding from underneath it. Two bright blue shields appeared before it, and its blue eye seemed to bore into his soul. It fired hot red plasma at Fuc's feet as it slowly advanced.

Fuc screamed, turned, and ran as fast as his little legs would take him. He ran down a dark hall toward green flashing lights at the far end of it. He didn't know where he was going. He just needed to get away from the immense threat.

Around the corner of the hallway came a Tall One.

The Arbiter!

Fuc frantically flailed his arms as he came up to him, "Big scary thing! Run away!" In his rapid hyperventilation, he began to snort and wail, "Don't make me go back! Arbiter! Protect! Proteect!"

Thel looked down at the Unggoy and held up his hand, "Stay here, Major Fuc. I will seek out this threat."

The Arbiter advanced down the hall alone, and Fuc watched him until he could no longer see the bright glint of his large shoulder guard.

"Unggoy are precious." A deep, silky feminine voice said somewhere ahead of him.

"Propose to one, if you find them so." Thel said as he flared his nostrils, snorting at the Flood stink.

"I already did."

"Hm. I would think that is the kindest thing you have said to me this entire mission." He said as he rounded the corner and stared out into a much larger room than the last. Four glowing pillars rose up from the middle of the room with a teal current coursing at their tops. White tubes were spanned across the top of the room, and two stories down was the ground floor, with ramps declining into underground halls. An Enforcer hovered above the four pillars. Thel's eyes narrowed on the teal beam. The pillars must be powering the shield generator.

As if on cue, Tartarus spoke to him, "You've reach the Shield's power source, Arbiter. Overload the locks holding it in place."

Thel looked down. There were two platforms beneath him to the floor. He would win no advantage over the Enforcer in the air. He needed stealth to attack its belly. A carbine would do little against those shields. Observing the floor, there were many Jiralhanae bodies strewn across it with their magenta blood smeared across the shiny metal.

Thel bent down and grabbed the edge of the platform. He swung himself underneath with a low grunt. Before he touched down on the floor beneath him, he kicked both of his feet into the wall, spun, and landed. Just as he touched down, red plasma hissed before his toes. Thel didn't need to look up to know that the Enforcer was advancing toward him.

The Arbiter charged to the side of the platform with long, swift strides from his powerful legs. Again, he leaped from the tall height and pounded his boots onto the floor with knees and hocks extremely bent. He slid down the ramps and ducked into the underground room where the Enforcer could not follow. He bent down close to a Jiralhanae's body, wrinkling his nose at the rancid scent.

"It's useless to attack an Enforcer from the front, especially when its shields are up." Tartarus said, apparently sensing some sort of struggle. "Stay in the shadows. Wait until it loses interest. Then strike its instruments when its back is turned."

Thel nodded, but said nothing as he scavenged for dual plasma rifles from the dead Brutes. Controls, buttons, and keys flickered on and off on the walls of the dark hallway. He suddenly became aware of the fact that there was no other noise when he dropped down from the platforms.

He finally found some rifles with decent amounts of plasma within their chargers, and sniffed the air.

"...Kalika?" He called softly.

No answer. Thel made a moaning sound in his throat. He looked around the edge of the wall and looked up just in time to see a volley of plasma rain down at the sand-colored wall above him. He recognized the white substance from the tubes fall down onto the upper floor, and a dark pillar of smoke frothed upwards toward the ceiling.

Kalika.

The Enforcer spun around and attacked the opposite side of the room. Thel poked his head out and fired his own guns at the tubes where Sentinels continued to exit from. There were eight tubes total in the room. This he remembered from the top of the platforms. The machines were distracted with the enemy on the other side of the battlefield. Thel took this chance to destroy the tubes along the walls.

It was time to move. Kalika spun on her heels and took off in a full sprint down the top platform as she continued to fire her weapons at the Sentinels. She completely ignored the Enforcer. She would deal

with it later. She could see Thel taking out the third of his tubes. She had already taken out her four on his side of the room.

Her concern for now were the Sentinels. There were two left on either side of the platform. She ducked away from the Enforcer's plasma, and readied to jump off of the platform-

WHAM!

Kalika's body was flung backwards. The metal of her armor clanged and clacked as she bounced several times across the platform's surface. She growled in agitation. Pain flared across her mandibles where she had been hit. Her shields hummed and recharged as she stood, firing her weapons at the Sentinel that had suddenly appeared on the other end.

Make that three.

Within a few shots, the Sentinel crashed before her in a heap of burnt and melted metal.

Never mind.

Kalika shot at the last Sentinels. Thel assisted and fired from below at one machine, as she took the other.

At the same time, the Sentinels fell to the floor. Thel stepped out and fired his rifles at the Enforcer. The large machine turned and focused its attention on him. Thel ducked behind the wall again to avoid its deadly aim, and occasionally fired back.

It was now or never.

Kalika kicked off from the wall and ran on her toes. She leaped off of the platform and sailed through the air for a while. Thel's hearts leaped up into his throat for a while, too.

She landed with a bang on the Enforcer's back, rocking its balance and making it tip back with a jerk. She slipped and began to fall off, but she twisted herself around and clung onto the machine's arm. For a moment, she was staring down a barrel of a gun, and the inside of it was glowing red.

She jerked her head back just before the gun fired. Heat burned the bottoms of her mandibles and her throat. She roared and swung herself around to grip the side of the cannon, readying a plasma grenade in one hand. As soon as the grenade sensed the air and its wall had expanded, it began to glow a bright blue color. She tossed it up onto the Enforcer's belly, where it stuck, and she immediately let go.

The large machine exploded above her and began to fall.

Well, THIS part wasn't very well thought out.

She tried to turn herself to land properly, but before her body crumpled onto the floor, she was suddenly scooped up into a strong pair of arms and dove out of the way. The Enforcer crashed beside them, and Thel sank to the ground, protecting her with his body as metal pieces flew out in their direction. He shields beeped and

turned purple before recharging once again.

He still held her very close to him for a good ten seconds more. Finally he opened his eyes and looked down at her, "Are you hurt?"

She looked up at him and shook her head, "Break the locks."

He still didn't let go of her. He rose his weapon and fired his rifle at one of the pillars. She rose her own and also shot at the glowing green locks. Each hissed and began to turn purple.

"One more, Arbiter. Release the power source." Tartarus commanded.

Thel helped her to stand in front of him, and walked up to a control panel. The screen read, "Power Down Containment Shield." He pressed it, and a low rumbling sound reverberated through out the facility.

"Now, find a way to remove it from its crate."

The wall in front of him parted, and the room became filled with light, blinding him for a moment. He looked back down at the controls as the platform he stood on began to move forward. Looking down, he frowned.

There was a great amount of blood on his arms. He did not recall anything tearing into his suit, but then again, the adrenaline pumping throughout his body could have ignored any pain. Pressing his thumb into the suit, he found no tear. After a moment's pause, his eyes widened and he turned around.

"Kalika."

She looked up at him and walked forward, "Hm?"

She was confused by the expression of horror on his face and looked down.

A very long piece of metal was sticking out of the right side of her abdomen in a strange angle. Purple blood trickled down her suit and dribbled on the floor.

"...Oh." She said and began to fall forward.

Thel lurched forward and caught her. "Tartarus!" He called into his communications as he laid her down across his thighs. He did not dare remove the metal, but he pressed his two index fingers on either side of it to apply pressure.

"What is it, Arbiter?"

"Kalika is severely injured." It took immense will power to keep his tone steady and calm. "I am requiring a Phantom to come pick her up."

"No!" Kalika yelled. "I must stay with you!"

Thel looked down at her in surprise. She was never this... desperate.

"Kalika, I will be fine. I can carry on this mission alone."

"We are approaching you now, Arbiter." Tartarus said.

"You will not lose your honor-"

"No, Thel!" She seemed nearly on the verge of tears. Thel was so confused. She tore his helmet off and clung to his suit. "You do not understand!" She was breathing frantically. "They are going to kill you!"

Again, his eye-ridges drew forward in confusion and concentration. "Who is going to kill me?"

"The Prophets! The Brutes! I must stay with you!" Her pupils were dilating, and he could feel her stomach rising and falling rapidly.

"Kalika, calm down." He said soothingly as the Phantom hovered overhead. "You are very seriously injured. You will recover, and I will see you when this mission is complete. I will accompany you soon on the ship. I promise this to you."

Kalika's head fell back in defeat. "Damn your obsession, Thel. Damn your Prophets."

Thel sadly looked down at her as a light frustration boiled within him. If he could just get her to see why he was doing this... in the end, it was all for Sanghelios. For them.

A bright blue light enveloped Kalika's body and lifted her up. She clenched his hand before they departed. Thel looked back down and placed his helmet upon his head once again.

"Our path to the Library is clear. I'll pick you up on the ledge ahead."

Thel watched the Phantom fly away toward a wall with a bright white light in the center of it. He watched the blue shield on top of the wall retreat and disintegrate as the platform continued toward the other end of the shield wall.

Another pair of doorways parted before him. From its dark depths, an Enforcer rose up and fired its weapons at the Phantom.

"Raaaah!" Tartarus growled and spun the ship away. "Blasted machines! Make your own way through the wall, Arbiter!"

Thel analyzed his next challenge. Flood human combat forms screeched and swarmed across two platforms above each other. Shielded Sentinels and golden Sentinel majors fired their lasers at the Flood. Thel was heading straight into a Flood-Forerunner war.

"Do NOT leave him!" Kalika roared, lashing and kicking at the Jiralhanae that held her arms.

Tartarus spun around and grabbed hold of the metal piece that was still embedded in her abdomen. He twisted it, drawing out a high pitched scream of pain from the female warrior. Her knees buckled and her body sagged as her expression tightened. "Silence, incompetent

one." He looked to the Jiralhanae, "Take her to the back."

The Brutes snorted and dragged her into the back room. They threw her against the wall, and her body slumped against it.

"Have your way with her." Tartarus said with a grunt and reentered the cabin.

Kalika's entire body was rigid with pain. Two boots thudded in front of her. She looked up into the one eye of Sor 'Rolamee.

* * *

><p>Arsen couldn't see ten feet in front of him. Or it was all just snow. The biting ice and wind screamed at him as his boots sunk and crunched upon the thick white substance.<p>

Most Sangheili lived in the warmer areas of Sanghelios. Few ever saw snow. Arsen had heard of it before. He had never seen it, nor walked in it. He knew now that he was not missing anything special.

It felt like they had been walking for hours. He couldn't feel his muzzle, and his jaws were very dry. Every breath he took sent a jolting shiver down his spine.

"Halt!" Rtas called.

The entire Stealth troop obeyed. They stood very still as Rtas slowly stepped forward. He wrinkled his muzzle and flared his nostrils. His jade eyes narrowed on the snow shifting before him. No wind could make the snow cave in like that.

Too late, he realized what was going on. He turned and commanded, "MOVE!"

A giant black jaw parted from underneath the snow, snatching one of the soldiers up into its sharp teeth. Two curved tusks swatted the others away.

"ARCTIC BEAST!" One of the soldiers cried as they unleashed a massive number of volleys on the creature's jaw.

The animal bellowed and lifted a massive clawed paw from the powdery snow, flinging ice everywhere as its immense body arose from the ground.

Rtas' eyes widened. Its head was as long as two Sangheili standing on top of each other. It had a thick white fur coat and four long legs. Two tusks curved out from behind its cheeks and pointed underneath its jaws. Two horns rose from its shoulder blades, and a short white tail flickered back and forth behind it. The animal was bigger than a Phantom. It released another angry, ground-quivering roar and swatted at the Sangheili, sending them flying in either direction as it crunched down on the Elite in its jaws. It tossed its head, flinging the half-chewed Elite back down the mountain.

Rtas released his own roar, wielding his plasma sword, _Nirak, _(**28**) and charging forward. Arsen followed with his own blade to back him up.

Together, they each dodged the animal's pointed, thrashing tusks. They each clung to a tuft of fur on the Arctic Beast's wrists and dug their blades into its skin.

Cyan blood bubbled and splattered on the snow as the creature reared up onto his hind legs with a wail.

"Climb, Arsen!" Rtas commanded, twisting the hot blade out and grabbing onto tufts of fur to climb up the animal's leg.

Arsen obeyed while they were suspended in mid-air. However, the animal began to fall. Its front legs pounded into the snow, nearly throwing Arsen off. The snow creature charged forward, trampling a few of the troops underneath its padded claws.

It is a hard thing, Arsen realized, to climb up an animal's leg while it is running. He continued to pull himself up, grinding his jaws and trying to refrain from puking. The movement of the smelly creature was jolting his brain around in his head.

At the same time, Arsen and Rtas pulled themselves up onto the animal's shoulders. They each grabbed the Arctic Beast's horns and held back their swords. As soon as they drove the tips of their blades into the creature's skin, it let up another wail and reared up once more.

Rtas removed his sword and ran forward as the animal began to fall. He roared and impaled Nirak through the back of the creature's throat.

The Arctic Beast still landed and began to lumber forward. Arsen stumbled past Rtas and shoved his blade into the animal's forehead. Cyan blood flowered across the Beast's white fur, and the animal's legs stopped functioning.

Rtas and Arsen both leaped away toward the ground as the creature collapsed with its blue tongue hanging out between its teeth.

Arsen lay there, looking up at the dark sky as his surviving brethren let up a victorious roar. The shield wall had been disabled, he noticed. The blizzard began to soften, and the white snow swirled past in a hurry.

Rtas approached him. "That was very well carried out, my friend." The Commander said.

Arsen suddenly became aware of the fact that he could not breathe, much less speak. Rtas frowned at the purple color thickening the snow on the ground around his Lieutenant.

"This is Spec Ops Commander Rtas. Tartarus, I require a Phantom. I have multiple injured. There is no infestation out here. Come pick us up." 'Vadumee said into his communications.

There was a very long moment of silence.

"Tartarus." Rtas said more sternly.

"...Tartarus! Come in! I repeat, there is no infestation."

There was another long pause.

"Damn Brutes." Rtas growled.

"I heard that." Tartarus snorted.

"Keep your communications on at all times." 'Vadumee said irritably.
"Hurry. Lives depend on your arrival."

"On our way."

Within a few minutes, after the Sangheili had scavenged whatever hides they deemed worthy from the Arctic Beast, Rtas could hear the thrum of a Phantom's engines. He reached down and wrapped his arms underneath Arsen's body.

"Ready, comrade?"

Arsen suddenly felt very uncomfortable, but he nodded stiffly. Rtas lifted him up off of the sharp rock underneath him, enticing an outcry from Arsen's throat.

Within the next couple of moments, Arsen blinked and found himself staring at a Phantom's ceiling. Looking around, he found that multiple other troops were also laying on the floor. An Engineer, or Huragok, floated up to him in its black shell-like capsule. Its dark eyes blinked at him curiously and shimmered with intelligence. Its glowing blue tentacles reached for him and curled around his body to roll him over. He closed his eyes as the sharp pain in his back began to ease into a cool, soothing sensation.

"Where is the female, Tartarus?" Rtas asked sternly as soon as he entered the cabin.

The Chieftain snarled irritably, "With the Arbiter. Why?"

"That is her blood on the lower wall outside those doors."

"She was injured and came aboard for a while."

A warning growl erupted from Rtas' throat as he said in a very low voice, "Her scent is mingled with another male's that is not the Arbiter's."

Tartarus rolled his massive shoulders back with a shrug, "It is not my fault that the female is a whore."

"Do not play games with me, Tartarus!" Rtas' eyes narrowed into slits.

This time, the Jiralhanae Chieftain turned around with wide eyes.
"And why would I want to play games with you, Commander? I only follow the laws of the Prophets."

Rtas curled his lips, "_Where_ is Kalika 'Vadamai, Tartarus?"

* * *

><p>The fragile film over her eyes flickered back and forth, trying to keep moist but trying to avoid the biting cold. Kalika groaned and

stretched out across the snow. There was still a burning sensation in her abdomen, but the metal piece was gone. She couldn't feel her limbs, and yet she was still able to clasp her palm firmly over the open wound. She looked down to see that there was still thick purple blood seeping through her fingers.<p>

They were kind enough to leave her a plasma rifle with five shots left in it before abandoning her on the snowy mountain. She couldn't remember much of what happened. Her head was pulsing and throbbing horribly, and she recalled passing out shortly after being thrown into the snow.

So they left her out here to die?

She fired the rifle five times aimlessly into the snow. With the other hand, she pulled off the cooling hood of the gun and removed the hot battery with a hiss. The battery was warm even in her temperature-adjusting gloves.

She peeled the sticky suit away from the wound and with a shaky breath, pressed the side of the battery against her skin.

Unimaginable pain lashed across her muscles. She willed herself to keep the battery there as she cried out long and hard. Her eyes were closed, and all of her muscles were contracting as if she were being electrocuted. She couldn't inhale because everything forced her to release her air in blood curdling screams.

Her entire body was shivering as she looked down. The bleeding definitely was slowing down, but the skin was turning a strange color as the wound swelled and closed around it.

She flung the battery away and panted heavily. She listened to the hiss of the snow as the battery melted through it, and the gentle song that the mountain's winds brought upon her. She made soft whimpering noises as a new horrible kind of burning sensation spread across her stomach. She was lucky that the metal piece hadn't penetrated any vital organs. It had inserted at a strange angle so that more skin was penetrated than any organs.

Her body still shivered uncontrollably, not because she was cold, but because her body was still suffering from shock.

She desperately wanted to stop the horrid burning sensation. She gathered snow in one palm and pressed it against the burn. The snow melted very swiftly, but it felt so wonderful against the burning. She rolled over onto her side and continued to scoop snow up onto the wound.

She laid there for a very long time before she finally stopped whimpering. Her hands weren't shaking as much as they were before, and her breathing slowed as she continued to press snow against the swollen skin.

Kalika closed her eyes. She would admit that she was tired. She was in pain. She could not see herself getting out of this one. She could not imagine standing now and carrying on the mission. She just wanted to lay here. To die, even.

Her eyes opened slowly again. How long had she been laying there in the gentle snow storm? Through the churning white flecks, off in the distance, she could see the dark outline of a building. It had multiple arms rising from its wide walls.

The Library.

Thel was in more danger than he knew. If she did not reach him in time...

With a hoarse growl rumbling in her chest, she clawed at the snow and rolled onto her belly. The wind kicked up again, as if it were trying to slam her back down into the icy carpet.

She refused to bow. On shaky legs, she straightened her ankles, then her knees. She stumbled forward, but sat up to balance herself as pain embraced her across her waist and hips. She blinked and closed her eyes as the icy snow bit at her face. Step by step, her boots sunk into the white powder with crunches. She stood on a dark cliff, observing the sharp drop off. She looked up at her goal " the dark building in the distance. The sky turned a bright fiery red color through the dark clouds behind the mountains.

She refused to die on this day. She refused to remain with her head bowed; to lie down when she was needed, even if nobody wanted her to be.

Why?

Because she had something worth fighting for.

Mist condensed from her jaws as she spoke softly,

"On and on shall old war go,

Without respite my blood will flow.

O'er your eyes 'til they cannot see

The impossibility of victory." (**29**)

* * *

><p>Author's Notes

*25) This is another way of saying for Sangheili, "Don't go through with something that you know will hurt you in the end."

26) On the radars, yellow dots are allies and red are the enemy.

27) Unggoy breathe methane. That's why they wear the masks. It's not because they're ugly. I promise. Nor are they mini-Banes. Get over yourself.

28) Shadow's Grace

29) This is an oath that the Sangheili made before joining the Covenant.

11. Log 10

CONSORT

of the

HERETIC

Created By Cyber and Zmori

Written by Zmori

Edited by ShoopWoop17

/Access Data Logs

2 November, Year 2552

The Shield Wall - Approaching The Library

13:36 Hours

CONNECTINGâ€¦

LOG 10

The popping hiss of an energy blade echoed throughout the dark room. The Arbiter's mighty roar drowned out the screams of the Flood, however they were overpowering him in great number. He moved toward the dim light at the opposite end of the open room, swinging his sword outward to keep any Flood away.

A Human combat form leaped up into the air to come down on top of him, however he turned his sword and swung it upwards through its body. The two halves of the Flood's body flew out into the blizzard. Many others followed in its path.

Thel grabbed a parasite by its head and threw it over the edge. He watched the wailing creature disappear into the thin clouds below. Looking into the distance among the mountains, nestled within drifting, bright gold clouds, was a short, wide dark building with lit windows. Silver arms stretched up from the ground and arched toward the center.

The Sacred Icon was near.

Thel looked away from the mountain scenery and slashed his sword across a piston's panel. The large metal structure hissed and rose away from the shaft beneath it. Thel sucked in a breath and jumped down. His boots slid across the dark shaft silently. Dim white lights lit the drastically slanted floors. Eventually, he landed on a dark grey metal platform. Like the previous room, a wall was open to the snowy mountains and allowed the vengeful wind to whip across his body.

He was surprised to see a Phantom fly past. It approached the open wall and aimed its plasma cannons at the attacking Sentinels nearby.

Thel whirled around and flicked his sword in an arc behind him.

Infection-forms, the smallest of the Flood parasites, exploded in midair. Green substances splattered across the top of the Arbiter's bowed silver helmet.

Looking into the room, in the far corner was the next piston, and in between the distance was an overwhelming, swarming mass of infection-forms. They screeched and hissed as they scurried on their black tentacles, flickering their fuzzy red antennas at the scent of living flesh.

Thel sighed tiredly. It was even energy-draining to flicker the thin film over his eyes. Purple blood slid along his upper mandibles, and there were several plasma burns on his muzzle. His shields had done well to absorb most of the damage, but he knew that there would be more new bruises to replace the old, crusted, and fading wounds.

He inhaled wearily, then quickly unhinged a grenade hidden behind his leg plate, activated it, and flung it into the Flood mass. He lifted his arm to defend his face as the grenade squealed and exploded, sending corpses swatting into the walls, floors, and some even into the ceiling. He ran past and again deactivated the far piston with his sword.

As he slid down the drafty shaft, his nostrils flared. He looked around himself to find that as he slid downward, snow floated upward. He smelled a curious mixed scent of burnt bodies and Flood.

He readied himself for another slope, but instead, he landed awkwardly on flat ground. He turned to look at a dark door, and as he approached it, the two panels drew back to reveal a very dark landscape. Looking around, he could see mountains rise up around him. Hills of white snow rose and fell across the uneven terrain, and far ahead of him was a ditch. A metal bridge led across it to a Covenant cannon outpost rising up in the middle of the hill. Debris from a crashed human ship lay scattered throughout the entire area; half of a hull rose up out of the white powdery hills and black wires still sputtered with white electricity as they swayed from their panels that had been torn from their controls.

Looking up into the sky, the Arbiter could see a human ship lowering toward the ground. It was far up in the air. It was long and gray, with strange white lettering along its wide hull. Thel knew that there were many diverse languages amongst the humans, but he recognized the writing to be English symbols. Beneath it was the dark outline of the library.

Thel was not surprised to see the humans here. They must have seen their chance as soon as the Shield Wall was deactivated. Now, it would be a race to the Sacred Icon. He had not realized how close they truly were. He parted his jaws to curse, but instead, they remained and no sound came as he watched a bright yellow flash flicker across the ship's midsection with red flame curling outwards, like a blooming flower with black smoke petals streaming through the grey sky.

There was no doubt that there would be more humans to take the falling ship's place. Thel blinked and looked back down to the ground where, on the other side of the bridge, Flood began to crawl out from the debris.

There was a buzzing sensation running along the back of his neck long before he heard the humming engines of the coming Phantoms. Two of the dark purple ships slowly approached and hovered on either side of the ditch. Four soldiers touched down on either side of him, and two more landed on the other side of the bridge.

Reinforcements. It was about time, as well. Thel's breath was still appearing in thick clouds irregularly beneath his jaws. In all honesty, he would rather sit than to carry on. However, he was the Arbiter, and much more, he had an important mission to complete, and a promise to keep; a wife to return to.

She was in safe hands. As long as she was under the protection of the Covenant, she would be alright. He reassured himself of this.

But he could not deny the sickening feeling that pulled behind his stomach ever since he had last seen her.

A parasite screamed somewhere ahead of him. There was no thought process when Thel wielded his energy sword. Only a reaction. In war, that was all warriors had room for at times. This thought in itself suddenly brought memory of his teacher, Lak 'Vadamee.

As Thel advanced forth with a flourish of his blade across the bridge alongside the other soldiers, Lak's voice began to slowly blur out all other noise.

"Breathe, Thel." Lak's words were always calm, and his voice had a deep, almost musical thrum to its noble tone. Thel's body automatically dodged and swung around his sword as the brief memory flickered across his subconscious vision.

The two suns of Sanghelios beat down on the dusty ground from their high thrones nestled in the gold, wispy clouds. As dusk neared, the red sky began to darken and the loud calls of the Helioskrill sounded throughout the dry, tall grass fields surrounding Vadam keep. Thel bent his knee and stretched out his back leg in a low stance as he pulled his wooden sword through the air in a full arc around himself. His teacher came back through and swung one end of his dark staff toward his head. Thel knelt down and lifted his training sword up barely in time. The loud crack of stringy wood against the sword echoed throughout the barren courtyard.

"Breathe." Lak repeated. Every time that Lak said this, Thel became aware of a terrible crushing pain in his lungs. He inhaled in short, gasping breaths as he cracked his sword again and again against Lak's staff. Sweat trickled across his thick skin, helping the floating dust that they kicked up to stick annoyingly in his nails and bare toes. He wore nothing but a squabbling's training garments; a light brown cloth that wrapped around his groin and hips.

CRACK!

The staff swatted his jaws, sending the small boy sprawling onto the hard dirt ground. Thel groaned and placed his hand to his face as Lak approached him with his staff held behind him.

"I do not understand, Uncle. (**30**)" Thel wheezed in his quiet voice, blinking his eyes at the horrible throbbing pain on his cheek. "What does breathing have to do with fighting?"

"And what does the wind have to do with the spreading of the seeds in the Rebirth season? What does the slope of a valley have to do with the current of its rivers and streams?" Lak asked calmly. A faint smile tugged at his cheeks, and an intelligent light twinkled in his golden eyes. The old warrior looked down thoughtfully at the young boy.

Thel 'Vadam (**31**) was shorter than the other boys in the keep. The other elders (**32**) found more interest in training the stronger and bigger of the children. However, Lak 'Vadamee understood that there was more to a Sangheili warrior than muscle and brawn. It was Lak's belief of honor and faith in Thel that had drawn the two so closely together with such a strong bond.

Thel's eye ridges furrowed together in concentration. Then he shook his head, "I do not see any way that a breath of air can block or stay a sword."

Uncle Lak began to chortle softly. "Were it so easy. Do you remember our lesson of last week?"

Again, Thel paused. "...Thoughts cloud the mind."

"Yes. And where do these thoughts come from?"

"...Well, they come from me."

Lak shook his head, "Incorrect."

Thel tilted his head in confusion at his teacher. "If thoughts are not my own, then where do they come from?"

"Thoughts emerge from your mind, Thel."

"Is there a difference between myself and my mind?"

"Yes." Lak paced before him slowly like he did when he was telling the younger squabblings of a legendary story. "The brain is merely a tool. It calculates and judges and labels things."

All of a sudden, Lak spun his staff toward Thel's head. Without thought, Thel's arm jerked upward to block the blow.

"Very good, Thel. You see?" Lak said, smiling approvingly at Thel's responsive reflexes.

"What am I supposed to see?"

Lak patiently responded, "You reacted without thought, did you not?" The older, tall warrior knelt down before him. "The thought process is much too slow to react in time to block my staff."

Thel stared for a very long time into Lak's eyes. "Thenâ€¦ if I am not thinking when I block your staffâ€¦ how did I know what to do?"

Lak placed an index finger to Thel's forehead. "Consciousness, Thel. Awareness and consciousness. The ability to know without knowing. The ability to understand without judgement or thought. We call this

consciousness. A warrior who thinks about his movements when he fights will surely die fast. A warrior who is without consciousness fights pointlessly. He becomes merely a reactive machine."

"But how can I not think when I'm not fighting? How can I react while being c-â€|" Thel's mandibles and tongue fumbled around the strange word. "C-conscious?" He began to sit up.

"The breath, Thel." Lak pressed his hand against Thel's chest. "Ask yourself in your head,... 'Am I breathing?'"

Thel closed his eyes and there was a pause as his chest slowly swelled.

"What did you hear?" Lak asked as Thel's chest resettled.

Thel opened his eyes, "There was a brief moment of silence."

"Precisely!" Lak said with the same enthusiasm that he used when he got to the climax of his stories. "Your brain stopped thinking to become aware of your breathing. When most warriors go into battle, either they are panic stricken or driven with so much adrenaline that they cloud their minds with thoughts and their breathing is irregular and rapid; they cannot possibly be aware of what is going on around them. Others are so used to war that all they do is react. They are machines. They are not aware of their breath. They may not even know of their purpose, their cause, what they're fighting for. They may have a great, talented skill, but it is all for naught if they are only driven by the instinct to react. It is the warrior who remains aware of the breath, aware of their surroundings, themselves, and of othersâ€| it is the conscious warrior who rises into legend, Thel. It is the conscious warrior who leads others into the glory of the battlefield and lifts his sword for an honorable cause; something worth fighting for."

Lak grabbed Thel's forearm and hoisted him up to stand. "The wind may not help the seeds grow in the Rebirth season, but it will help guide them in the right directions to grow their roots. A river and a stream may choose their own paths; run their own course, but the valley and the ground determine the power of their currents. A breath may not stay a sword, Thel, but it will stay your thoughts. It will help you to remain aware." He placed his hand on Thel's shoulder. "Do you understand?"

Thel nodded slowly, "Yes."

Lak tilted his head questionably at Thel's desolate expression. "Is there something on your mind, Thel?"

"...May I ask a question, Uncle?"

"But, of course."

"If I am not my mindâ€| if my thoughts are not meâ€|" He looked up at his teacher. "...Then who am I? What amâ€| I?"

Before Lak could answer, a sweet voice floated across the air. "Filling my son's head with old philosophies, are we now, Lak 'Vadamee?"

The two males looked up at Thel's mother as she walked gracefully through the tall archway into the courtyard. She was truly a beautiful woman. She may have been one of the smaller females of the keep, but it was something about her elegant stride, or perhaps it was in the way that she held her chins up that made her body seem to resonate with power. Her smooth skin was a fine autumn brown-red hue, and her hazel eyes shimmered like the wind waving through the green and gold fields of the Vadam valleys. Her robe fell and flowed at her tall ankles in translucent, fallow gold silks. It hugged her supple waist attractively and rippled down her shoulders with dyes of greens lightly hinting the edges. Gold metal armor guards decorated her thin mandibles and her feet.

She approached her son and was not reluctant to place both of her hands on his sweaty shoulders. "It is time for your academic lessons."

"May I have five minutes more with Uncle Lak, mother?" Thel asked hopefully, looking up at her.

"No, love, you are already late."

"My sincerest apologies, Lady 'Vadam. Thel, obey your mother and go wash." Lak said, fitting his staff to its holder on his back.

The only reason that he remembered this conversation so specifically was because of the similar looks that Uncle Lak and his mother exchanged. It was in that conversation that Thel discovered that there might just be something more between the two.

"Farewell." He heard his mother say to his teacher as they walked away.

"Goodbye, Lady Mad'ryn."

The memory occurred to him within a matter of seconds. Costly seconds. Sanghelios and his mother disintegrated before him and was replaced with the gaping jaws of a human combat form. He drew his sword forward and slashed it through the Flood's rotting flesh. The parasite released a new kind of scream as Thel threw it into the snow and advanced with the other soldiers into the coming enemy.

A sound of scurrying feet through hard, compacted snow behind him made him turn his head to find that he was being followed by four other Combat-forms. The other Sangheili warriors had dispersed ahead of him. The Arbiter slid under the degrading structure of the crashed ship hull and curled his fingers around three thick cables that hung from its ruined wall. He yanked hard and drew the cables out with a frustrating struggle. Thel dug his toes into the snow and curled his lips as he forced the cables through the jagged, torn metal hole. The shuffling of snow came nearer rapidly.

There was a clang and the wires would budge no more. Thel turned and held out the cables as the four parasites fumbled over each other to get to him first. Thel stepped forward and jerked the wires outward across their bodies. Each parasite tangled themselves against the black wires, gurgling their screams. He came up behind them, lassoing all four together with the thick wires around their necks and waists. With the other hand, he slashed open their chests and throats, and

proceeded to kick the two parasites still standing into the snow. He spun around and swung his sword again through an infection form before kicking up dirtied snow and charging toward the Sangheili troop ahead. With powerful strides up the hill and alongside two other soldiers, he hacked and tore his way to the other side of the battlefield. Thel pressed himself up against a black boulder as he moved forward. A buzzing feeling tingled at the nape of his neck-

Barely a moment later, a sword's spokes sliced toward his muzzle.

The two swords clashed against one another and shook in their wielders' shaking grips. Thel looked into the dark red eyes of Arsen. The crimson pupils widened with recognition, and the two warriors drew their swords away from each other reluctantly.

"Forerunners, be praised!" Arsen breathed. "The Arbiter!" The Stealth soldier butted his armored snout behind himself, beckoning Thel on. "This quarantine zone has been compromised. We must do what we can against the Flood."

Arsen led the Arbiter into the jagged black mouth of a short tunnel that burrowed through the mountain face. Within the tunnel, the flitting snow could not pester their skin. His voice echoed as he spoke, "Our Commander has landed further in. Let us join him."

They stepped out into the icy winds once more and drug their toes through the piles of purple, green, and black stained snow. Thel looked out onto another outpost surrounded by a ditch, and in the center was the flash of silver armor rapidly dodging amongst the mass of parasites surrounding it.

Rtas 'Vadumee.

Thel began to charge, and as he built up speed through his powerful gait, he thrust his sword out to his side. He rose his sword and-

There was an explosion somewhere nearby that sent the large warrior sprawling into the snow. He could not hear the rapid beeping of his shields or his name being called in the distance. He heard nothing.

He thought nothing.

His head turned, his gaze focusing on the hazy dark clouds above him and the slow, graceful twirl of shimmering snowflakes dipping toward the ground. The dancing ice crystals were in no hurry to join their brethren amongst the stained snow. A golden light faded and came again through the churning black skies.

...Am I breathing?

A low, rushing sound shuddered within his throat and cool air flowed through his small nostrils. A deep sighing sound powerfully vibrated in his chest as he became aware of himself. In time, his eyes narrowed, and the detail of one particular snowflake suddenly became of interest. As the ice crystal turned, whites and blues glittered across its intricate designs, outlined by the black haze of the storm

above it. The deep, rushing sound came again, and he felt his lungs expand with satisfying air. He felt at peace.

There was a murmur of sound in the distance. An echo of a sound. What was it? The smell of burnt rubber and blood tingled at his senses. His armor was heavy against his smooth, cool suit. The skin on the nape of his neck began to vibrate intensely and his jaws felt jolted by some unknown force. The sensation grew worse as a Phantom ship flew overhead, followed by a large booming sound that caused a horrible pain in his thighs. The pain seized him like a terrible suffocating pair of hands that moved upwards until it engulfed his whole body. Panic caused him to sit up in alarm and everything sped back up to normal time. The sounds around him were no longer echoes in the distance.

"Arbiter!" Arsen called as he approached, kicking away Infection-forms and squashing them into small green pulps beneath his boots. "Are you alright?"

Thel blinked, in a daze, and slowly stood as he wrapped his numb fingers around the handle of his sword that had settled into a puddle of melted snow. There was an annoying, high-pitched ringing sound itching at his ears. He shook his head and turned his eyes to the outpost in the center of the battlefield.

...What was that? What had just happened? He wanted to describe it, to classify it in his thoughts but there were little words. Peace. Calmness. There was a silence within him that he had never experienced before. Already, the experience was fading away from memory, and desperately, he tried to hold onto it; to relive it.

"ARBITER!"

Thel stepped behind his other leg, spun, and ducked as an energy sword skimmed across his shields above his head. He thrust his own sword across a Human-Combat form's waist, cutting the wretched thing in half. Even with its body mangled, it still squirmed, hissed, and spat on the ground. Thel stood and drove the tips of his blade through the parasite's head with a mighty battle cry. He whirled around with lips peeling back like curtains, causing wrinkles to furrow against each other across his snout. His eyes were wide and his many rows of teeth flashed as he drove his sword through the head of another infected human. The parasite screamed, flinging its claws at Thel's arms, but he disdainfully shoved his boot against its chest and forced it down into the snow.

"Arbiter!" Rtas called as he approached, expertly swinging his sword behind himself. "What are you doing here?!"

"The Flood is upon us!" Arsen called somewhere near Thel.

Rtas joined Thel, back to back, and called out to the Sangheili joining them, "We must hold this camp until reinforcements arrive!"

Arsen let up a battle cry as he and his brethren dove into the masses of approaching Flood. Rtas and Thel were glorious; together, they advanced through Human-Combat forms with powerful flourishes, hacks, stabs, slices, slashes, and kicks.

"I do not understand. How did you not know of my presence here?" Thel yelled over the screams of the parasites.

"We were informed that you had returned to a Phantom in Tartarus' fleet."

Thel slashed his blade across a parasite's face, grabbed its gaping jaws with the other hand, roared, and threw it to the ground where he could crush its head with his boot. "By whom?" He inquired irritably with a turn of his head.

Rtas met his eyes with his own, "The Chieftain himself." The Commander spun and tore a gaping wound into a human's face with his blade. As the parasite collapsed, he readied a grenade and flung it at a bulging Carrier-form waddling toward them.

Carrier-forms were truly one of the most repulsive of the Flood forms. Giant sacs filled with small infection-forms sagged over their faces and upper bodies. They had useless, tiny arms, and they shuffled slowly by on two thick, oozing legs. Red tentacles flickered out from underneath the parasite's sac; sensors of smell, most likely.

The grenade began to whine after it stuck one in the head, and exploded violently. The dying Infection-forms squirmed on the ground and began to drag themselves across the snow to other fallen bodies. The soldiers were fast to stomp their feet on them to prevent any more raising of the dead.

Thel elbowed a human parasite behind him, extended his arm, and stuck his blade into its head as it thrashed in the snow. The Arbiter blinked his eyes from a moment as he steadily drew his sword away.

"...The Chieftain?" He asked.

Rtas nodded, "Perhaps he was mistaken."

Thel looked up, reassuring himself, "Perhaps."

The Arbiter began to walk toward the Commander, who looked up at something in the air. A tingling sensation again nipped at the back of his neck, and the steady hums of a Phantom's engines approached overhead.

"Forerunners be praised!" Rtas called as he lifted his sword to the skies.

The ship fired its cannons at the last of the Flood mass. The parasites screeched and shriveled at the heat of the red plasma, screaming before they died.

"At the center of this zone is an item critical to the Great Journey." Thel said, turning to Rtas as the Phantom returned and hovered overhead. He curled his fist before his waist, "I must find it."

Rtas nodded and lifted his fist, "We shall cut into the heart of this infestation, retrieve the Icon,

>and burn any Flood that stand in our way."<p>

The few remaining soldiers rose their weapons and roared in response.

The Commander turned his cool gaze back to the Arbiter, and in a very serious tone heavy with caution, said, "The Parasite is not the to be trifled with. I hope you know what you are doing."

Rtas began to walk away to regroup with his men, but Thel called to him, "What of my wife?"

The Commander stopped very abruptly. He was very still and quiet. Thel did not find comfort in the way that Rtas' tone had gotten surprisingly heavier. "She was not on board... when we regrouped."

"Then she is in High Charity?" Thel asked with a tinge of hope.

"So the Chieftain says." Rtas turned and walked up to him once more with a bowed head. Once he was before the Arbiter, he leaned in to speak into his ear softly, yet with enough intensity to express his urgency, "Her blood stained the floor, but her scent was mixed with another's."

Thel's entire body went rigid, but his expression did not alter. His tone, however, shivered as he repeated, "...Mixed with another's?"

"Yes. Tartarus made it abundantly clear that she was willing in all of her actions." Rtas said without meeting Thel's wide stare. The Commander stared straight ahead as he continued in a low voice, "The scent was that of the honor guard who had attacked her before we began the mission."

"What is his name?" Thel asked with the same shiver of, perhaps, anger rattling his words.

"Sor 'Rolamee."

Thel made note to memorize this name. Confusedly, he inquired, "Willingly, you said?"

Rtas nodded slowly, "Or so the Chieftain says inâ€| defensive tones." Then the Commander said in a shockingly more dangerous, quieter voice, "I cannot be sure of the Chieftain's loyalty to the Covenant, Arbiter. I fear he and his Brutes are commencing heresy against the Prophets."

Thel was motionless in his desolate expression, "Where are they?"

"Focus on the mission at hand, Arbiter. Nothing before the Great Journey." With that, the Commander pulled away and walked on toward the blue lights of the Phantoms, "Forward warriors! And fear not pain or death! Go, Arbiter, I'll follow when our reinforcements arrive."

Thel watched him go and stood in the snow silently. Arsen approached beside him, "We will meet him again approaching the Library. Let us

leave and continue on our path, Arbiter."

Thel nodded and followed Arsen. They began to trot toward the Ghosts and Spectre, the vehicles' lights dim in the haze of the snow storm.

* * *

><p>Her breathing hadn't changed much over the hours, it seemed. Her chest felt like it was going to concave and stab her lungs. Her throat felt as though it were on fire despite the freezing air that scraped across the roof of her mouth and made all four of her mandibles feel like they were going to fall off.<p>

Her armor was not as outdated as the Arbiter's armor, but it most certainly was not as advanced as Covenant armor. There was little temperature moderation save what protection her suit provided her. She had her hand clamped over the horrid pain in her stomach, and she stumbled and lost balance frequently.

She blinked her eyes and forced them to focus on the dim lights far off in the distance. She felt as though ice was creeping onto her bones and along every crevice in every joint. She bared her sharp teeth at the wind, as though she could scare it away. The silver storm had shrouded the dark shadow of the Library. All she could do was to head toward the flickering lights ahead and hope that she would find something useful until the storm settled.

Even if she made it in time, what could she do? She could barely walk, much less fight. The Flood could take her by surprise and she could do little about it. What help would she be? All she knew was that there was an undeniable feeling within; a void that told her she had to get there in time. She could already be too late, and she would most likely not make it out of this mission alive.

The thoughts rolled around in her head again and again, the same words repeating themselves over and over again. Hours passed, and the lights grew no larger nor brighter. They only flickered tauntingly in the distance. Kalika looked behind herself. Her footsteps were brushed away by the powerful storm so that nothing but smooth, stark hills lay out behind her, erasing any evidence of her existence there. She looked ahead again.

The lights were gone.

She stopped walking and lifted her snout. Her eyes narrowed on the dark gray haze where the small lights were supposed to be. The mist frothing from her jaws was whipped away by the screaming winds. She stood very still in the midst of the desolate mountain storm. Nothing but her breath and the breath of the wind showed any signs of life. No light came from the clouds, nor any face of any mountain. Nothing but shadow, darkness, and snow swirled before her where those lights were supposed to be.

She kept walking. Her hand clenched into a fist over her wound and she grit her teeth as she drug her feet through the thick snow.

It was not long before she had to stop again. She looked upon a very wide chasm before her feet. She could see nothing beyond the great, jagged rock leading down. With regret, she removed her hand from her

wound and slowly began to crouch down. The cold stung the swollen scar, but she only clenched her teeth harder, wrinkled her muzzle, and stretched her toes down to the rock below. The metal chink of her boots sent echoes throughout the chasm as she slowly descended into darkness.

She would be protected from the winds here, but the temperatures dropped as she continued downward. She could, however, hear noises echoing softly to the eastern end of the chasm. She stretched her toes out to a rock below, but did not set foot on rock. She looked down at the ground where her boot rested in flat snow. She stepped down with her other foot and released the wall. Despite the appearance of depth of the chasm, it was actually only about triple her height. She looked up from where she had come. Snow slowly floated downward from the black skies.

A loud scream made her flinch and look sharply in its direction. It had come from the east. The scream echoed and faded away. She drew Skira and held the curved, thin sword in front of her. She could only hear the gentle echoes of her own breathing. She advanced forward toward the faint echoes. It sounded like soft popping sounds. As she drew closer, the cracking sounds became more defined.

Kalika advanced forward with a slight limp, clasping her other hand over her wound again. There was light ahead. It was soft and flickering, but it was undeniable that there was light there. Her pace quickened and she swept her sword behind herself as the chasm narrowed.

The light disappeared. A scream shattered the suspenseful silence and a shadow lurched toward her. Kalika inhaled forcefully and jerked her body to turn it in the narrow chasm. She swung her sword forward, and something impaled itself on its tip.

She stared into the blank, white eyes of a human's dead face. Its skin was rotting green, and its head was barely attached to its body by visible red strands of flesh. The parasite screamed again from its lolling head, snapping its jaw at her face. She spread her mandibles in a ferocious roar and pulled her sword upward through its torso. She kicked the repulsive thing away.

She hated narrow places. Her slight claustrophobia kicked in at this point, and she squeezed her body through the chasm after stepping over the Human-Combat form. She grunted and shoved herself out of the crag and stumbled out into the open air.

She looked out onto a flat plane of snow surrounded by mountains. She stood on a ledge that dropped off sharply into a basin below where a battle raged on. The Flood was surrounding a group of strange small aliens in camouflage armor, however the aliens seemed to be taking advantage over the Flood.

Humans.

Humans were strange, small aliens about the size of a Kig-Yar, however not quite as ugly. They were a fairly intelligent species, or so she had heard. She had never had the chance to encounter them before. She found more interest in the vehicles on the other side of the battlefield. She put away Skira and began to observe a way down.

A sharp pain jabbed at the back of her knees. She allowed herself to fall as another pain emerged on her lower back. Something cold was shoved against her cheek and a hand gripped her snout forcefully.

"Don't move, split-lip, or I'll blow your brains out!" A harsh voice said behind her.

Damn! It was just one thing after another! The young marine's grip shivered with adrenaline, but his finger on the trigger of his SMG was steady. He couldn't recognize the armor. It wasn't Covenant. It wasn't fighting his grip at all. Was it a Jackal? No, too tall. Elite? Most likely. He saw the jaws, but the feathers were slightly misleading. So far, the Elite didn't seem to be aggressive.

"You'll stand and we'll go down the ramp SLOWLY. Don't pull any tricks!" He growled. When the Elite didn't respond, he jabbed it with his boot again. It seemed to get the message and slowly began to stand.

Shit! It was tall. He pressed the tip of his gun against its suit on the lower back. They slowly walked forward and down a zig-zagging pathway down into the basin. The Elite didn't seem to understand English, but it understood taps and jabs of his gun.

"What you got, marine?" His sergeant called.

"...I'm not sure, sir! Come take a look!" The marine signaled the Elite to kneel in the ground.

"That's a tall-ass Jackal, but if it's Covenant, shoot it."

Kalika looked up at the humans who approached her. She counted seven walking her way. She found a peculiar interest in the only dark-skinned human who walked at the front of the group before. Her eyes narrowed in curiosity as she observed the human's different badges on his camouflage uniform.

"It's not a Jackal, and I'm not sure it's Covenant either, sir." The marine stood beside the alien, barely taller than it kneeling and tapped his gun against the Elite's mandibles. The Elite didn't seem to mind this at all and passively looked upon them.

"Hm." The sergeant said and squinted at the alien. It stared blankly back at him with aggrandizing pupils. He sighed heavily through his nose and called, "What do you make of it, ma'am?"

The human "ma'am" came up beside him. It wore a silver uniform and had short black hair fluttering like tassels in the wind. Its grey eyes looked her up and down. Observing the obvious difference of anatomy, Kalika came to the conclusion that "ma'am" was female.

"It's a female." Commander Keyes said.

Many pairs of eyes grew wide. The few surviving marines looked over each other's shoulders to get a good look at the Elite kneeling in the snow. It looked back at them ever so dully as if their existence was barely of notice to it.

"Say what?!" The sergeant sputtered.

"Look at her body. Those are birthing hips. Her shoulders aren't at all as broad as all of the others." Keyes walked forth and took hold of the Elite's helmet, who didn't seem to have a problem with being touched. She motioned her hand toward her head, "Her forehead is curved, the cheekbones are more pronounced, and even the mandibles are structured differently. Everything screams female on this one."

"Butâ€¦" One of the marines began. All eyes turned to the biggest marine of the platoon. "She doesn't have anyâ€¦" He made a cupping motion before his chest.

"Reptiles don't have boobs, stupid." The marine next to him said.

"They aren't warm blooded either. Elites are mammals, jack-ass!"

"How on Earth are Elites mammals!?"

"We're not on Earth!"

The other marine began to spit with each word, "That's not the point, dumb-ass!"

"MARINES!" The sergeant yelled.

"Sir!" The two marines stood at attention.

"SHUT THE HELL UP!"

"Sir, yes sir!"

Keyes looked back at the Elite and said in a very cold tone, "I know you know how to get to the Library. Take us to it, or without mercy, we will kill you."

Keyes and the Elite stared at each other for a very long time. The Elite's pupils narrowed into slits. Was thatâ€¦ a smile that Keyes saw on her cheeks?

"_Koruk glahn be'at Pa'rak erhkt schloon. Glav' ne'pah rect oon shpes blun mat'rechat._" Her voice was low like an Elite, but was definitely feminine.

"What didâ€¦ _she_ say?" The sergeant asked.

Keyes shook her head. "Nothing that the translators can pick up." She leaned in, "I know you can understand me. Take usâ€¦ to the Icon."

The Elite tilted her head at the human, as if she really didn't understand. Eventually, she said in the common Sangheili tongue, "Very well, 'ma'am.'"

"That's more like it." Keyes nodded. "Load her up. Let's move. No tricks, Split-lip. One wrong move, and you're-"

"Dead?" Kalika looked up at Keyes with a light in her eyes that couldn't make the Commander feel comfortable. "I already am." She was forced to stand and was led to the large human vehicles called "Warthogs" as the marines called it. Keyes looked after her with an expression that read confusion and determination. The Commander followed the marines into the front Warthog with the Elite. They had the Elite sit in the the passenger seat, and Keyes sat behind her with a marine. The sergeant joined the last three marines in the last Warthog.

"Where to?" Keyes asked, pointing her gun at the Elite's head.

"Up the slope to the north."

The Warthog roared to life and its lights lit up the snow with a yellow color. It startled the Elite, much to Keyes' amusement. The vehicle lurched forward and spun around, spewing snow like a fan beside it.

It sped to the other end of the basin, following the tracks that were already embedded in the snow. The green armored car turned to the gray haze in the north where the lights were flickering again.

Kalika honestly had no idea how to get to the Library, much less, get inside of it. All she had was the gut feeling that they had to follow those lights where the Library was so long ago before the dark storm swept in.

"Follow the lights ahead."

"...What lights?" The marine driving asked.

"The two flickering ones in the darkness. There." She pointed.

"...I don't see anything but the haze."

Kalika looked ahead and blinked at the two dim lights in the blackness. They were definitely there.

Keyes looked, but there was only a dark haze. "...There aren't any lights, Split-lip."

Kalika's eye-ridges furrowed together. She exhaled and nodded her head, "Just keep going north." She looked out into the hills of snow flying by. She closed her eyes and hugged her arms across her waist. The cold winds lashed across her face, but she was thankful that she was not walking. She rested her back as comfortably as she could against the thin cushions, remaining aware of the pressure of "ma'am"'s gun against the back of her helmet slipped underneath the armor shafts.

"What's your name?" Miranda asked as her gun made a threatening click sound.

The Elite tiredly opened her eyes, "Kalika 'Vadamai."

"Are you with the Covenant? I don't recognize the armor."

"In a certain way, yes. In another, no."

Keyes shoved the gun against her neck, "Make sense."

"I am Sangheili, but I do not agree with nor always follow the commands assigned to me by the Covenant."

"And what command have they given you to be out here?"

Kalika responded calmly, "Accompany the Arbiter and retrieve the Icon."

Keyes made sure that her communications were recording and continued in interest, "The Arbiter? Who is that?"

"It is the highest military rank donned upon a Sangheili. Each Arbiter falls into legend after his inevitable death in battle for a cause of great importance to the Covenant." Kalika closed her eyes again, "He is also heading toward the Library as we speak. He is a great warrior. Do not take him lightly."

Keyes nodded, "How did you find us? Are there more of you searching for us?"

Kalika shook her head, "No. I was unaware of your presence. I was abandoned many miles south of here."

"Why?"

Kalika exhaled softly, "I am wounded severely. The Chieftain will tell that I died of my wound. I have information that would sway the Arbiter in his path for the Great Journey; and now, he is on his way to complete a mission without cause." She paused for a moment to recollect her thoughts. "They sought to rid of me to prevent that information from getting to him."

"They left you to die?"

"Yes."

Keyes gun was no longer causing pain in her neck. "If you no longer serve the Covenant, what is your objective?"

Kalika opened her eyes, "Save the Arbiter before the Covenant kills him."

"Why is the Arbiter so important to you? If he is so valued by the Covenant, shouldn't you be enemies?"

"The Arbiter is my husband."

Keyes blinked. That complicated things a bit.

Kalika craned her neck slightly and continued, "I have no intention of hurting you, human. My family is important to me. I only wish to save my husband."

She did not remove her gun from her armor shaft, however she did not hold the tip to her skin so harshly any longer. "I'll believe you when I see it."

They rode in silence for the rest of the way. The Warthog jerked and jolted across the hills as the mountains drew steadily nearer. In a much shorter time than she had anticipated, the base of the mountain arose out of the haze. Looking at it from behind the bullet-proof glass window, she could see details of the silvery rock emerge from the bright puffs of swirling snow.

Looking up, she could see the dipping walls and protruding docks of the Library, but looking down, there was nothing but rock. No door, no entrance. Nothing.

The Elite stepped out of the vehicle and was closely followed by Commander Keyes. The second marine joined her and trained his gun on the Elite. Kalika walked forward and looked up and down the rock face, dragging her toes across the snow.

"How do we get in?" Keyes' gun clicked.

"Patience, human." Kalika said, flaring her nostrils and reaching out to the rock before her.

CHINK!

She flinched and looked down at a gray metal block that her toes had scraped across. She turned and knelt down, shoving away snow and wiping it away. There was light coming up from it. Keyes helped her to uncover what appeared to be a horizontal door in the ground. A large window allowed them to look down a lit ramp.

"Do you know how to open it?" Keyes asked, brushing her fingertips along the rim of the silver door.

Skira sparked and lit up the metal with blue light. The humans immediately pointed their weapons at her as she rose it swiftly above her head. She shoved the sword's tip into the window. The thick glass cracked and created a spider web-like pattern. She stabbed the sword again into the same spot, shattering the glass and sending the shards sliding down the ramp below. She ran her sword along the edges of the window to rid of any sharp edges.

"...That works, too." Keyes murmured and stood. Kalika put her sword away as the sergeant and his three marines approached in their second Warthog. The sergeant approached and looked up at Kalika, who looked back at him.

He motioned toward the ramp, "Ladies first."

Kalika, finding his words strange, furrowed her eye ridges together, but gripped the edge of the window, stuck her legs inside, and swung herself onto the ramp. She wielded her sword once again and slowly stepped down the metal downward incline. Her boots crunched on glass as she walked. She didn't care to keep quiet. Breaking the window would have made enough noise to alert anything that was inside.

The ramp opened into a wide, white-walled hallway as the floor straightened back out. The corridor was brightly lit with white lights along its floors and ahead appeared to be a multicolored pedestal. An elevator most likely.

She could hear the humans following her down the long hallway. The way appeared to be clear. Kalika kept her sword out to her side, checking the ceilings and the gleaming white walls. They came up to the pedestal and walked into a circular room. A great shaft stretched so far up that she could barely see the top. She waited for all the humans to get on the circular glass platform.

Keyes pressed the button on the touch screen of the pedestal. The elevator immediately lurched upwards, nearly sending the platoon into the floor. Kalika kept her sword pointed toward the ground as the humans kept their weapons pointed upwards.

One of the larger marines looked at her and smirked, "Pff. Swords are overrated."

Kalika tilted her head at him, "I beg your pardon?"

"Guns are better. You can't hit a target coming at you from far away with a sword."

Keyes rolled her eyes and calmly reminded herself that marines were paid for following orders and not necessarily their brains.

Kalika nodded and looked away, "You are entitled to your opinion."

"It's not an opinion, split-lip."

"Shut up, Perez!" The sergeant growled.

"Yes sir!"

The Elite made a huffing noise. A sort of laugh, maybe? Keyes had her eyes on her, and kept a weapon trained on her head. She would never trust an Elite, but there was something about this one that perhaps made her favor her over the others. Then again, this was the only time that she had captured an alien enemy that wasn't showing any intention nor in any position to kill them. She reminded herself that she couldn't let her guard down. It was more than likely that the Elite had fabricated her whole story and that they were headed into a Covenant trap.

The elevator came to a stop with a soft beep. Keyes motioned for the Elite to take the lead into the next room. The room was quite open and plain, and had a large door at the opposite end. The marines followed the Elite at a quick pace, and the door automatically parted for them.

They ran out into open air. The snow fell gently and the wind had come to a stop. A massive brown metal gondola stretched out before them with ramps leading up to a pedestal. Across to the opposite mountain peaks, two large docks made of metal with a circular gate within each resided. The gates sat beneath a tall, large building that rose into the fading clouds, shining with silver brilliance along each of its many thin towers. The Library was truly a wondrous structure.

The sergeant led them all onto the gondola before them and stopped before the pedestal. Keyes walked in the back of the group and nodded to him, "Punch it, Johnson." Sgt. Johnson obeyed, and the great

machine gently began to pull away from the dock with a great deal of clacking sounds.

Commander 'Vadumee looked away from the Library and watched the grand platform roll by ahead of them. "More humans!" He growled.

The Arbiter also looked at the distant structure. They both stood in front of the pedestal of the second brown metal structure that was parallel to the humans. "They must be after the Icon." Thel said. A yowl echoed throughout the building behind them, making them both turn and curl their fists.

"On your way, Arbiter!" Rtas drew his blade and looked to him, "I'll deal with these beasts!" The Commander ran back into the entryway of the Flood infested building. The rest of the platoon was already waiting on the lower platform of the structure. Thel looked ahead and pounded on the button of the pedestal. The great machine immediately began to pull forth. The Arbiter looked up at the humans own mechanism pulling on ahead of them as a tingling sensation crawled along the nape of his neck.

"I see that coward didn't join you." Tartarus' voice breathed gruffly into his communications. Thel turned his head ever so slightly to get a reassuring glimpse of the Phantom flying behind them. "I'll do what I can to keep the Flood off your back."

As the circular gates ahead rotated and retreated away from each other, the Flood was revealed on the ledges above their path, awaiting their chance to board the grand mechanism.

Kalika, Commander Keyes, Sgt. Johnson, and the other five marines were already inside the Library on their mechanism. It was deathly quiet. Keyes didn't like this. She walked up and down ramps, aiming her flashlights at dark corners, but there was nothing. Sgt. Johnson patrolled the top of the structure as it calmly levitated on down the gigantic corridor. Keyes walked back up next to Johnson. "I don't like this." She said softly to him.

"Relax. We'll be fine. We're ahead of the Covenant, we've got a prisoner to take in for questioning--"

The gondola suddenly shuddered and began to groan. Keyes gave a very irritated expression to Johnson, "You and your big mouth."

"I had a feeling that Murphy was in a mood to kick some ass today."

"AAAAAAAH!"

Sgt. Johnson and Commander Keyes split away from each other and ran down ramps toward the scream. They both came to an immediate halt as they stared in horror and awe at the scene before them.

Large green tentacles wrapped and coiled themselves around the base of the structure. The five marines yelled and fired their guns at the thick appendages. The loud cracking and popping noises of their guns echoed throughout the dark corridor. "GET TO HIGHER GROUND, MARINES!" Johnson yelled, his arms jerking with the kickbacks of his weapon.

One of the tentacles wrapped themselves around a marine and dragged him into the depths of the abyss below. "Grayson!" One of the marines shouted and reached for his friend, but he too was lifted off his feet and thrust overboard.

"Damn!" Johnson yelled, running out into the swarm of tentacles and grabbing a marine by his jacket. He dragged him up the ramp and up onto the uppermost floor of the brown structure. "McKenzie, get your shit together! Move!"

"Where is the Elite?" Keyes called, looking around and continuing to fire her gun at the writhing tentacles. Like hell she would let that alien sneak up on her.

"She's the least of our problems! Let's move, marines!" Johnson shouted. The last two marines down below carried themselves to the top floor where there were less of the tentacles.

"PEREZ!" Keyes yelled, spinning around and aiming at the tentacle whipping toward him. He wasn't going to turn in time.

A flash of blue light blinded Perez for a moment. When he blinked and regain focus, he could see the Elite standing over him with her sword outstretched before her. It was graceful; the way that her sword fluidly stroked the air and how her body twisted and turned like a dancer. Her expression was calm and concentrated. She unclasped another sword, this one of a silvery purple color, and slashed through the many tentacles. She dodged away from the smaller ones trying to grab at her ankles, spun, and cut them away as well.

She curled her lips as she hacked the last of the tentacles close to her away. "Can your gun do that, human?" She asked as she looked over the edge of the structure.

Perez shook his head with his jaw slightly slack.

"Have you any explosives?" She asked.

He shook his head again.

"Damn." She muttered. She had no choice. She gave him a quick glimpse. "Cover me."

Perez nodded, closing his jaw and turning away, reloading his SMG, readying himself for the enemy.

Kalika exhaled slowly and set her swords vertically before her so that the handles were pointing toward each other. She drew her thumbs along the glowing lines of the black handles to deactivate the blades, and then stroked them along a different line as she pressed the two handles together. There was a popping, chirping noise that came from the swords. In a very slow process, curved black metal rose from the handles of the swords, joining the handles into one. Plasma fired from both ends of the one handle in a unified color that very much resembled the blue-purple colors of the common energy swords. The plasma arced out into three curved, slightly "s" shaped blades. Kalika held the crackling weapon out before her with one shivering arm holding its dreadful weight. She hated using this weapon for many reasons, but in this case, it was necessary.

She pressed two fingers on the middle of the handle with her other hand. The glove's designs began to glow and generated a silver energy shield to protect her arm from the radiation of the raw plasma. A tiny ball of plasma aggrandized at her fingertips with a high pitched whining sound. Kalika inhaled and drew her arm back. Bright arcs of electricity drew a straight line from the handle to her drawn back arm. The other lines connected from either end of the plasma arcs to her fingers. The weapon was about as tall as she was.

Perez turned in curiosity at the great deal of noise going on behind him. Keyes and Johnson turned as well. Was she carrying... some kind of bow? The Elite drew an "arrow" back as far as she could and inhaled sharply. She stepped forward and aimed the heavy weapon over the edge of the short wall. The whining sound grew louder and more annoying the more that she strained on the "strings". She aimed the point toward the dark origin of the tentacles, which jerked away from the bright light of the bow. Kalika roared with a flash of teeth and let the arrow fly.

There was a very loud booming sound that very much resembled the noise of an explosion. The bright white streak of plasma, or the "arrow" made a great deal of whining...

...and then disappeared.

Perez frowned, watching over the edge of the wall, "...What good is that? I was expecting something a little more-

Kalika grabbed the human by the top of his vest and yanked hard, throwing her weapon to the ground. She set him in front of her with her back to the wall. A bright flash of white light lit up the walls and a great obstreperous sound rose up from the abyss.

The tentacles immediately began to retreat back into the darkness. As soon as the light faded, Johnson looked over the edge. "...Hell yeah! Damn! Where can I get me one of those?"

Keyes rubbed her head, "That is... a very over powered weapon."

Kalika snorted, "Not at all." She picked up the two regular handles and clipped the deactivated swords to her thighs. "I only have one shot, and the swords drain off of the same plasma. They are useless until I recharge them. Each shot degrades the swords, its too bright to aim at anything of accuracy, too loud to be any kind of stealth advance, too heavy to move quickly with-

Perez interrupted, "You just blew up a Flood monster with that thing! What is it?!"

"_Sarin._"

"Where can I-

A bellow rose up from far beneath them. Perez stood very still before saying, "...That didn't sound good."

The structure came to a halt and steadily began to rise upward toward the main sector of the Library. The tentacles rose up again with more ferocity and violence before. Their skins were black and bled green

ooze.

"Damn. It's just pissed off now." Keyes grumbled. "Any chance that you could whip out another-" She turned to the Elite, but she wasn't there. "Where is she?!" Keyes yelled.

"She jumped! Down there!" Perez yelled, pointing over the edge of the structure and down at the floors below. Indeed, the pesky Elite was darting away across the platforms below.

"DAMN!" Keyes shouted and aimed her weapons at the blackened tentacles.

Kalika ran toward an open door in the wall. She ran into a dark, narrow corridor and immediately collapsed onto the ground. She groaned loudly, closed her eyes, and clutched her quivering hand over her wound. An unpleasant sensation made her head feel like it was spinning. She got onto her knees and began to vomit painfully and uncontrollably. Sweat dripped off of her muzzle. Her body wracked with pain and contraction as she coughed and puked across the floor. She wrinkled her muzzle in disgust at the smell of it.

She was almost there.

She slowly got up and hugged her waist, clenching her teeth and groaning as she limped down the hallway. She spit at the wall to clean whatever vomit was left in her mouth and continued on. Lights flickered on and off in the long hallway, disorienting her eyes. Her pupils dilated and narrowed in attempt to focus, but she couldn't. She closed her eyes, keeping her ears listening, her nostrils open, and all feeling aware. The hallway was silent except for her noisy breathing and the sound of her boots scraping on the metal floor. She would have to find another way up to get to him.

* * *

><p>Thel stepped off of the gondola and onto solid Forerunner floor. He ran inside the main quarter of the Library. He could smell the humans up ahead.<p>

"Get to the Icon, Arbiter!" Tartarus yelled into the communications.

Thel found himself... small compared to the proportions of the grand Forerunner designs around him. He had no time to admire it. He ran as hard as his long legs would allow him as he traced the humans scents. Dodging around large silver pillars and white ramps, he found himself before a great door.

A body of a Sangheili lay propped up in a dark corner. He would not have noticed him if he had not moved. "Arbiter..." He groaned.

Thel stopped and looked to him. One of his eyes was black and bloody. The Honor Guard.

The Arbiter curled his lips and growled angrily. He stormed over to him and grabbed him around his throat. Easily, he hoisted him up off of his feet and slammed him hard into the wall. He said in a very low, threatening voice, "Give me one valid reason why I should not tear out your heretic throat upon this very floor."

"Arbiter!" Sor choked, weakly clasping to his wrists. "They have tricked you! Please, listen!"

Thel bore his teeth and spat, "I do not need to hear. Too many times have I been claimed to be tricked and lied to. I can smell her on you." He squeezed his throat unforgivably, "Traitorous bastard!" He snarled.

"I... did not... take her! Blood... her blood... they threw her to the... wastelands... she will... die... if you don't..." Sor choked and gasped desperately for breath, but Thel's titan grip closed off his airway completely.

Gradually, Thel regained control of himself and loosened his grip to allow him breath. "Speak quickly."

Sor gasped heavily in between his words. "They beat me and left me here to die."

"I do not care for your treacherous hide. What of Kalika?"

"They threw her in a barren zone of the snowy mountains south of here." He looked up at the Arbiter, "I did not touch your wife. I am not that dim-witted. I learned my lesson when she took my eye."

"Why do you smell of her?" Thel growled.

"Her blood stained my suit and the floor when she coughed it up. Tartarus and his brutes beat me and our blood mixed."

"How is it that you are here before Tartarus, then, if you were with him?"

"He awaits inside. He and his Jiralhanae destroyed the defenses-"

"LIAR!" Thel roared and tightened his grip on his throat again. "Tartarus is behind me on a Phantom waiting for me to return with the Icon!"

"No! He awaits inside! He will kill you, Arbiter!" Sor choked. "He brought me aboard the... Phantom... to blame me for your wife's death! To keep you on his side! Please!... Arbiter!"

Thel threw him aside and stormed off into the main quarter of the Library. There was a large circular room before him with destroyed Enforcers all around the floor. There was a gaping hole in the middle of the uneven floor. A small blue and green glowing item in the shape of a "T" levitated in the air on the opposite side of the room. The Icon!

There was more noise ahead. He activated his camouflage device and crept silently among the debris of the destroyed Enforcers. Two humans were patrolling the door. He quietly activated his blade and stalked up behind them.

"-and then the swords just like... transformed into this bad ass looking bow! And-"

A sword stabbed one of the humans through the stomach. Before either of them could cry out, Thel slammed both of their skulls into the ground with his arm. He gently set the two bodies down and continued forward. Looking at the Icon, he could see a human with a grey uniform hanging on a tentacle reaching for it.

Commander Keyes snatched the Icon from its holder, "Gotcha!"

The tentacle that she was holding onto gave way and began to drop her, making her heart feel like it was leaping up into her throat. And then she wasn't falling anymore.

Looking up, she could see Sgt. Johnson holding onto the small tentacle. "You know... your father never asked me for help either!" He called.

Keyes hooked the Icon into her belt, "The Index is secure." She said, placing the flat of her boots on the wall and walking her way back up as Johnson pulled.

As soon as she was on solid ground, he turned and yelled, "McKenzie! Perez! How's our exit?"

There was no answer. He hoisted his gun up against his shoulder. "You hear me, marines?!" He looked to Keyes, "We've got trouble."

Keyes lifted her dual wielding SMGs up and followed Johnson through the debris. The sergeant looked into the dark crevices and corners of the broken machines. It seemed like something big had already been through this area to destroy all of the Enforcers and bash up the floor.

Something moved in the darkness- something big. Something was there but could only be seen because the surroundings became distorted wherever it went. It advanced very quickly toward him.

"Damn!" Johnson yelled and fired at the thing.

Thel's cloaking device deactivated as the human's weapon tore at his shields. He swatted the human's gun downward, and the human rose his arm to hit him. Thel knocked his arm down as well and grabbed him harshly by his elbows to disable his movement. He held him up off of the ground and glared at him.

"How ya doin'?" Johnson asked.

Keyes rolled her eyes.

Thel growled gruffly and slammed his armored head into Johnson's cap. The sergeant's head lolled and his body collapsed.

Now was her chance. "Sergeant! Get down!" Keyes called. She fired her SMGs at the Arbiter. Again, she did not recognize the armor. He had to be the Arbiter that the female Elite had spoken of. He jumped out of the way behind an Enforcer, and ran to a much more appropriate, large piece of debris to avoid Keyes' raining gun fire.

"Johnson! Are you alright?! Johnson?!" Keyes called. His body was motionless and no sound came from him. Her guns flew out of her hands. She spun around and looked up at the Arbiter. Damn, they were

a tall species.

A bright blue energy field surrounded her body with a loud whirring sound. It blocked off all air and seemed to be sucking it all out of her lungs. She was lifted off of her feet and then her world fell into darkness.

Tartarus manipulated the field with his gravity hammer and brought the human up against his shoulder with an unpleasant jerking motion. "Excellent work, Arbiter." Tartarus nodded to him. "The Hierarchs will be pleased."

Thel held his arm over his waist where a bullet had torn through his shields. "The Icon... is my responsibility."

"WAS your responsibility!" The Chieftain retorted. He snatched the Icon out of the unconscious human's belt. "...Now it is mine." He said with a smug snarl upon his lips. Three Brutes circled and surrounded the Arbiter against a pile of debris. Thel looked to them, blinking his wide eyes in disbelief. One of the Brutes seized the darker human's leg and drug him across the floor. "A bloody fate awaits you and the rest of your incompetent race." Tartarus said, carelessly placing the female human upon the same Brute's shoulder. He rose up his hammer, "...and I, Tartarus, Chieftain of the Brutes, will send you to it!"

Thel, in his struggle to accept what was going on, managed to say angrily and defiantly, "When the Prophets learn of this... they will take your head!"

"When they learn?" Tartarus chuckled heartily, enticing a confused blink and a tilt of the head from the Arbiter. "Fool. They ordered me to do it."

Thel rose his head and his eyes grew wide. Tartarus' hammer glowed and seized the Arbiter in gravity bonds. He couldn't breathe. His world, too, began to fall into darkness just before Tartarus thrust him down the shaft of the Index. He was falling... the lights around him and the stars above dimmed, and the sounds silenced...

Thel was falling rapidly. She could see him. Kalika looked down. A great darkness was beneath them. She had managed to position herself on a thin ring far beneath the Icon. She had to think fast.

Another ring downward. Too thin. Too far. Falling. Too hard. Big jump. Wounds. He'll die. Can't let-

She jumped. She didn't know why or have any set plan in mind. She had angled herself very horizontally before she kicked off of the rim and timed it just before Thel fell past her. She tackled him in midair and hugged him tightly as they rolled through the air.

Impact. Blinding, painful impact. The sounds of shields beeping and regenerating echoed dimly in her ears.

They had landed on their sides on a very thin ring in the shaft just big enough for them both. Thel's back was pressed up against the wall of the shaft and Kalika still clutched her arms around him tightly. She panted and wheezed, but she was more focused on Thel who was motionless in her arms.

"Thel." She said to him worriedly, softly placing her muzzle against his. She couldn't feel a breath nor any pulse. Her eyes widened and she swallowed dryly. "Thel, wake up." She refused to acknowledge what her mind was telling her. Her free hand quivered uncontrollably as she stroked his closed eyelids gently with her fingertips. She gasped for breath, but her bruised ribs were not the only things that were effecting her breathing. She commanded herself to calm down, but the conclusion of her mind continued to stab without mercy at her hearts.

She was too late.

She wrapped her arm over his neck and gripped the back of his helmet as she squeezed her eyes shut and nuzzled his nose. She could not cry. Tartarus and the Brutes could still be up there. Silent tears welled up in her eyes and streaked down her cheeks as she clenched her fists in anger at herself. There was no way for a Sangheili to express the feeling within her; the feeling of a great black hole swallowing her hearts. It was a hard, crushing feeling that was inexpressible and made her whole world seem to fall apart. The hatred of herself and the sorrowful loss of her husband... if she had only tried harder.

"I am so sorry, love." She croaked, her body shaking and struggling angrily for air. Her armored muzzle clicked against his, continuing to nuzzle him, imagining that he would return it.

"...You do care."

Kalika flinched and opened her watering eyes. She stared into a bright pair of amused golden pupils. All at once, her anger inverted to him and her relief washed over her. Excitement and happiness came across her face first as he exhaled gently against her snout, reassuring her that she was not imagining it. Her arms squeezed around him harder than ever, and he wrapped his own around her waist. He pulled her close against him and returned the nuzzle longingly.

"You blind, one-hearted fool!" Kalika whimpered, finding it much easier, though still painful to breathe. She trembled in his arms and still sniffled, but a bright smile had taken seize of her cheeks.

Thel chuckled softly and inhaled her lovely scent, "You cannot be a woman of iron all of the time, my love." He held her trembling body tightly without any intention of letting her go. A deep rumbling sound shuddered through his chest; it was almost a purring noise.

Kalika breathed deeply. "I am so sorry." She said softly, unashamed of her tears. "I should have come sooner. I tried-"

"Hush, Kalika." Thel squeezed his hug around her. "I am the one to blame." He sighed. "You were right about Tartarus and the Brutes. You and Rtas both tried to warn me, but-"

Kalika yelped suddenly. Startled, he released her for fear that he had hurt her, but her body was being drug off of the edge. He reached out desperately to grab her, however something coiled around his leg

and yanked him back. He clutched to the ledge, but a force stronger than he dragged him down into the darkness below.

****Author's Notes****

30) All children refer to elders as "Uncle". See 32.

31) Reminder! Only Elites that are in the military obtain the suffix "-ee" at the ends of their names. At this time, Thel is only a squabbling and is not in the military, thus the change of name.

32) On Sanghelios, each keep consists of several "elders" and their blood line. Commonly, children cannot know who their fathers are, therefore, elders must treat all children equally to avoid suspicion.

12. Log 11

CONSORT

of the

HERETIC

Created by Cyber and Zmori

Written by Zmori

Edited by ShoopWoop17

/Access Data Logs

Year 2552, November 2nd

Location Unknown

21:53 Hours

CONNECTING...

Log 11

He will awakenâ€¦!

Kalika blinked wearily. She couldn't see much of anything except for blurry shapes and fuzzy lights. Her head felt heavy on her neck and her bones ached as though her entire body had been drained of all fluids. Oh, by the gods! What was that horrid stench?! Her muzzle wrinkled in disgust. She felt like she needed to vomit again. There was an annoying beeping sound coming from somewhere overhead... She had to cover her wound from the hot air that occupied the chamber.

But she couldn't move her arms. They were bound above her head. Her eyes shot open and she jerked her arms and legs violently, however, looking at her limbs, she realized that they were bound by small tentacles. She curled her lips and hissed threateningly at the tentacles as she twisted and thrashed her body. They contracted and pulled on her as a lone tentacle unfurled before her waist. Its tip

hovered and pointed toward the wet scar on her stomach. She inhaled and sucked her stomach in, trying desperately to get away from the Flood creature. Two other thinner tentacles rose up and picked at the sticky, bloody opening of her suit. She thrashed and kicked, roared and bit, clawed and hissed, but the tentacles were unaffected by her attempts to rid of them. They tore her suit apart, revealing her bloody belly.

She finally managed to jerk one hand free. She turned and tore a tentacle away from her other arm. She started to fall backwards, being only held by the legs, but the two smaller tentacles caught her around the waist, slid beneath her suit, and ran up her back. It was not a pleasant feeling.

The smallest of the tentacles hovered its tip directly above her wound. She growled and hissed as a thunderous alien voice resonated from deep within her bones.

"_The fight for freedomâ€¦ is an illusion."_

The tentacle stabbed into the open wound, splitting apart flesh, writhing itself beneath her skin as warm purple blood poured forth. She choked out a scream and pain turned her body to ice, creating an unbearable stiffness that overcame her.

She was breathing rapidly when she woke up with a start. She looked down. There were no tentacles inside her suit, and much to her relief, not inside of her either. They were simply binding her arms and legs. She got the message; do not resist. She remained stiff and expressed her discomfort openly.

The cavern was dark. Parasites with long pale arms grew along the walls, spewing sickly green spores into the air. Above her were dim red lights. There was still a faint, low beeping sound... an alarm of some sort. An enormous mass of tentacles squirmed about in the center of the room, and above them, a colossal head without any eyes pointed down at her. It had four jaws; two large ones parting vertically with what appeared to be crusted, stringy brown teeth and two others parting horizontally with slick membranes connecting them to the large bottom jaw. Its skin was dark green with an ugly, gnarled texture and dark brown mist frothed from its mouth. The smell was horrid. The slimy, yet rough texture of the tentacles were not inviting either.

Kalika curled her lips back. Her jaws shivered and the tip of her tongue protruded with a hiss. "What do you want with me, parasite?" She spat with loathing.

The giant head bowed toward her. More writhing tentacles emerged from the pools of shadow around her. She was pulled toward the alien parasite. She hovered before it as it belched up a rank green mist.

"_The same essence that allâ€¦ seek._" It spoke with multiple voices in a reverberating and thunderous chorus. It thrashed its tentacles about as if to emphasize this broad point.

"Where is Thel? Where is the Arbiter?"

"_So many insignificant questionsâ€¦ so little timeâ€¦_" The parasite

rumbled.

"GIVE ME ANSWERS, BLASTED PARASITE!"

The parasite belched again, enveloping her in a thick cloud of green mist. "_Learn to observe that of which you ask before you are too incompetent to see the world through the eyes of anotherâ€¦_" This sentence was followed by a disgusting snort and another wave of stinking dark mist.

Kalika, being repulsed by the creature's breath, wrinkled her snout as she processed the parasite's words. She looked around, narrowing her eyes to focus on the writhing army of tentacles surrounding her like pillars of a living temple. One of the tentacles appeared to have a strange mangled appearance to it with a swollen tip. As the tentacle came closer, she realized that that it was not disfigured, but in fact was wrapped around a green armored figureâ€¦ a Spartan. She had heard many tales of the giant humans and their legendary capabilities. She had a decent idea of who this was. She had expected him to seem a little moreâ€¦ intimidating, perhaps? She certainly knew better than to underestimate the Master Chief; the Demon who had destroyed the first Halo and dishonored her husband.

The dim lighting made his visor a deep gold with dark shades of orange sliding across its smooth surface. The tips of his black gloves began to twitch and his neck began to swivel. His arms and legs started to jerk in discomfort; the effect of his restraints. The center of his visor suddenly focused on her. He stopped jerking and they both stared at each other.

Tentacles reached up and wrapped around Kalika's jaws. She flinched and jerked her limbs away, but the tentacles only continued to tighten and clamp down around her, holding her firmly in place. Master Chief watched in confusion, and yanked his arm to test the tentacle's strength. In response, it clamped down harshly to which the Spartan grunted in discomfort.

"What... is that?" Cortana, his AI, asked him from her communications in his helmet.

"_...I? â€¦ I am a monument to all your sins..._"

The Arbiter himself seemed to have come to as well. He struggled and grunted, swinging his arms at the tentacles that bound him as he was drawn closer to the Master Chief.

"Relax." The Spartan said calmly. "I'd rather not piss this thing off."

"Demon!" Thel spat the moment he saw him.

The parasite made a loud grunting noise that drew the Arbiter's attention to him. The giant parasite then turned its large head toward the Master Chief. "_This one is made of machine and nerve..._" Then he growled deeply, spewing forth more brown-green air. "_...and has his mind concluded._" He said, wrapping a tentacle around the Chief's helmet.

With a higher rumble of a growl, it turned its head again, this time to the Arbiter. "_...This one is but flesh and faith... and is the

more deluded._"

"Kill me or release me, parasite..." Thel said with a command, his tone weighed down with impatience. "...but do _not_ waste my time with talk."

Kalika looked to the great parasite, "Do not take it too seriously. He says the same words to me."

The parasite grumbled, "_There is much talk... and I have listened through rock and metal and time... now I shall talk... and YOU shall listen..._" The parasite turned his head away from the agitated Sangheili, and instead looked to something tangled within his tentacles... an Oracle!

The orb's eye was dim and red, but his voice called out in a lively fashion, "Greetings! I am twenty-four-oh-one Penitent Tangent. I am the monitor of installation zero-five." It said very matter-of-factly.

A much more disturbing sight appeared; a San Shyuum's body was merged with another tentacle beside 2401, almost as if he were living off of it. He cried out weakly, "...And I! â€| am the Prophet of Regret! Council most high... Hierarch of the Covenant!"

2401's single eye flickered when it saw Master Chief. "A Reclaimer (**33**)?! Here?!" Its eye flickered on and off again as it sighed with relief, "At last! We have much to do! This facility must be activated if we are to control this outbreak!"

Regret shouted, "Stay where you are! Nothing can be done until my sermon is complete!"

2401 shook its head at him, "Not true. This installation has a successful utilization record of one-point-two trillion simulated and one actual. It is ready to fire on demand."

Regret shivered and tightened his fist with frustration, "Of all the objects our Lords left behind, there are none so worthless as these Oracles! They know nothing of the Great Journey!"

The Oracle took on a more obstinate tone with the Prophet, "And you know nothing about containment! You have demonstrated complete disregard for even the most basic of protocols!"

"_This one's containment...and this one's Great Journey are the same." _The Prophet and the Oracle were both dragged back down into the shadows, and with their decent came a cry of fear from Regret. "_Your Prophets have promised you freedom from a doomed existence. But you will find no salvation on this ring. Those who built this place knew what they wrought. Do not mistake their intent, or all will perish as they did before._"

Thel's head slowly began to bow in thought. Master Chief nodded, "This thing is right. Halo is a weapon. Your Prophets are making a big mistake."

Kalika gave a very knowing smile to Thel, who dismissively looked away from her. Master Chief was surprised at how human her face looked with a knowing manner of, "I told you so."

The Arbiter bared his teeth at him, "Your ignorance already destroyed one of the Sacred Rings, demon. It shall not harm another."

The giant parasite bowed its great head, "_If you will not hear the truth, then I will show it to you."_ He turned the tip of his jaws up toward the ceiling, "_There is still time to keep the key from turning. But first, it must be found..."_ He looked toward Master Chief, "_You will search one likely spot..."_ then turned to the Arbiter and Kalika_, "...and you will search another." _The parasite breathed more putrid air upon them both, "Fate had us meet as foes, but this ring will make us brothers!"

The tentacles began to pull them down into the depths below. Suddenly, bright yellow fields of energy surrounded all three of them and she felt the familiar feeling of being teleported to a different location...

Thel lifted his hand away from vibrant green blades of grass. He sat up and gazed at a dark gray sky with swirled clouds and the shadow of the other end of the Halo ring, and down below the cliff he stood on were dark green canopies that looked up at him. To his left, a path cut into the cliff higher up and into a jungle, descending down and disappearing around a bend. His nostrils flared gently in response to the cool breeze that swept through the air as he rubbed his wrist where a tentacle had held him too tightly.

Tartarus had the Index. Thel knew that the Brute had the fullest intention of using it. The parasite must have sent him somewhere near a structure the Covenant called the Activation Room.

"Are you going to spend your time listening to the birds?" Kalika asked, picking up an energy sword further down along the path.

Thel flinched and looked at her, "You are here?"

Kalika readied her blade and replied sarcastically, "Evidently not."

Thel wrinkled his snout at her presence. "You know I am not happy wi-

"Under the circumstances, it would seem that you have little choice, whether you are happy or not." She said, turning around and walking down the path with a gentle sway of her hips.

Thel shook his head. Females...

But he reluctantly bowed his head and followed her closely and protectively, nonetheless.

* * *

><p>Chaos had overcome High Charity like a great plague. Arsen had been trying his best to aide the Jiralhanae with calming the riots that had arisen around the High Prophet's chambers ever since he had returned from his last mission. A Flood infestation had somehow broken out near the launching bay
and was spreading rapidly throughout the city. Sangheili were being killed left and right without reason. Arsen tried to bring the shouting crowds of Unggoy

and Kig'Yar to listen to sense. "Remain vigilant! Loyal! You will not be harmed!" He would cry, but to no avail. The Jiralhanae were only making things worse by violently shoving the crowds with their pole arms and killing any who fought back.

"Arsen!"

The battle-weary Sangheili turned his head toward the doorway where a Major in red armor limped toward him down the tall staircase. "Khron!" Arsen called and turned away from the screeching crowds, climbing up the stairs to him. "Could matters possibly be worse, brother?" He asked, having seen Khron's wide eyes.

"The...the Demon is in the Prophet's Sanctum."

"...It seems it can be." Arsen growled and made his way quickly toward the doors.

* * *

><p>Tartarus had left behind a strong number of his troops to slow them down. The Jiralhanae loyal to him came with explosives, heavy weapons and armor, and as always, their horrific odor. Reinforcements had met up with them along the way and followed a little bit too far behind. Thel found it extremely difficult to keep track of Kalika in the midst of all of the battle. He had not forgotten her scar from the Library. He could not tell if it was adrenaline that kept her on her feet or her stubborn hard-headedness. He did everything in his power to cover her and protect her, which seemed to be of some nuisance to her.<p>

"Thel, watch your own back." She said, running with him up the slopes of the jungle. "You can barely hold them off yourself. Your charming looks are too irresistible for their kind."

The Arbiter grunted in reply to this and brandished his energy blade as the next platoon of Jiralhanae came at them from the trees. Two came at him from the path and shot their plasma rifles at him. His shields flared up in response to their red firings, and lifted his sword. He swung it across one of the Jiralhanae's chest, and slashed again up his throat, breaking through his shields and bloodying his neck as he kicked out with his opposite leg to the other Jiralhanae. With the collapse of the first, he pinned the second to a tree with another kick and shoved his blade into his chest.

When he turned, Kalika was already running toward the end of the path. "Kalika!" He hissed. He picked up the dead Jiralhanae's plasma rifles and caught up with her much more quickly than he ever could. She was much slower than she normally was. "Take these." He offered them to her.

She looked at him with narrowed eyes, "You want me to use guns?"

"You have used them before, have you not?"

"Of course, but I am more comfortable with a blade."

"And I am more comfortable with you being away from harm. Take them."

Kalika put one foot in front of the other in defiance.

Thel curled his lips and said in a much more dangerous tone, "Take them. I will not ask again."

She gave him several more costly seconds with an intense glare before slowly putting away her sword and taking up both of the weapons. He nodded, "Stay to the trees." She parted her jaws to respond in protest, but he turned swiftly and growled ferociously at her. "I will not play games." He said with bright, narrowed eyes. She blinked at him in surprise. "Stay to the trees. Do not bring attention to yourself." He bared his teeth, "You will certainly not want to bring mine."

He stormed off with a snort. Kalika stared after him with raised eye-ridges. Eventually, a large smile played across her Sangheili cheeks. "_There's_ my husband." She said softly to herself and dodged into the trees, sneaking along the jungle forage swiftly alongside him.

Thel walked up to a structure that was built into the cliff-side; a silver Forerunner metal that resembled a sliding door. The reinforcements had caught up with them and scouted the rest of the area. One of the Elites gazed upon the Jiralhanae, "By the Prophets!" He growled at the door, then looked to the Arbiter. "What have these Brutes done? They have shed our blood, and for that, they must die!"

The Arbiter bowed his head, "To battle, my brothers." The doors slid open with a hiss. The Arbiter took the lead, followed by the rest of the Elites. A few moments later, Kalika ran inside just before the doors closed.

* * *

><p>Arsen shoved past Unggoy and Kig'Yar, who whined and yelled after him. He readied his carbine by his side as he flew down the great halls of the Prophet's Sanctum beneath the shadows of its grand levitating pillars. The moment he burst in through the doors of the Sanctum, there was a heavy silence that settled through the air. He waited in the middle of the grand carpet and listened patiently, looking across the circular platform at the back of the room and at the six doors on either side of the long room.<p>

A scream sounded to the right side of the room. Arsen turned with a jerk of his head and ran toward the closest door. It opened with a low beep, and revealed a bloody trail of Covenant bodies and Flood biomass. This had to be it. He charged into the dark corridor, thrusting his arms back and forth with his carbine and being careful to step over the bodies of his comrades.

He did not have to run long to find the Demon.

Master Chief leaped up in the air, aimed his needler downwards and fired purple crystals into the head of a Brute. He landed with a boot on the alien's now spiky head, and swung his elbow back into the face of a Jackal. He recognized the battle cry of an Elite coming up behind him. He spun around and flung his arm up to defend himself from the Elite's attack.

Arsen slammed his carbine into the Demon's arm, who stumbled back in surprise. Arsen came again and again, shoving the butt of the weapon into the Demon's gut and swatting his visor with the pointed end. The Spartan dropped the needler, threw up his arms and grasped the carbine with both hands. They both wrestled with the weapon, twisting their arms back and forth and pressing as hard as they possibly could at one another.

Chief lifted his leg and kicked the raging Elite in the belly, who doubled back and roared in frustration. The Elite aimed the carbine and fired the deadly weapon at his head. He crouched and charged, wrapping his arms around the Elite's waist. He ran the Elite into the wall, sat up, drove back his fist, and swung it again and again into his muzzle.

Arsen blinked and flashed his teeth at the Demon, letting loose a ferocious growl. He drew up his knee and thrust it into the Demon's waist. The Demon staggered for a moment, but came back at him with a risen elbow, which he drove into Arsen's helmet. He was forced to collapse onto the floor, and looked up at the Demon.

Master Chief drew up the carbine from the ground, aimed the weapon between the creature's deep red eyes, and did not hesitate to pull the trigger.

* * *

><p>They were in some kind of magnificent Forerunner base. Silver towers and very intricate designed buildings could be found in the cave-like structure. They had battled through many platoons of Brutes, Grunts, and Jackals, and found themselves in a maze of hallways and doors. Eventually, the small group made it to a pair of doors very similar to the entrance into the base. When they parted, Thel and his Elites were fired upon by many Brutes.<p>

Shields flared and weapons were aimed as plasma flew between the two nemesis. At the end of the battle, Thel stood tall with only one man down. They were doing better than he had anticipated, although he knew that he couldn't get his hopes up just yet.

They found themselves on a cliff, overlooking a beach and an ocean with bright blue water. In between them and the water was a sheer drop, and the soft cheery chirps of birds could be heard in the calm silence of the men who each looked to their Arbiter. Thel looked to the Activation room... a tall pyramid-like structure with spiraling pinnacles and grand archways... his destination.

Thel turned toward a path that scaled downwards toward his goal. There, Brutes carrying bright red flags aimed their guns at him. His men responded with loud battle cries and charged into the brush, firing their plasma weapons of multicolored light into the enemy. Thel followed them when the back of his neck tingled with a familiar sensation. A Phantom flew overhead, disappearing over the cliff... most likely bringing more troops in attempt to hold them back.

A Sangheili in silver armor fell before the brutal power of the Jiralhanae, but even the enemy could do little against the raging Separatists. As their bodies collapsed, Thel let loose a blood-curdling roar of victory, raising his sword until the last

Brute's blood was spilled. His roar echoed into the large black cave that loomed before them at the bottom of the slope.

The rest of the Sangheili looked to him doubtfully, but he continued forth, bringing his blade to his side, prepared for whatever was inside. His eyes could make out glints in the shadow... He recognized the curved hood of Ghosts. "Vehicles! Come!" Thel shouted and walked forward, readying his weapon for any kinds of ambushes. The vehicles must have belonged to the Brutes camped at the mouth of the cave. Each Sangheili took to one.

Kalika trailed behind as each Sangheili sat in their Ghosts. When she found that all of the vehicles were full, her eyes cut to Thel, who gazed back at her coolly. With a hand planted firmly over her wound, she said, "I would advise that we split up."

Thel's nostrils flared, "Absolutely not. You are staying with us, under our protection."

Kalika's eyes narrowed, "You would have your injured wife follow you into battle?"

The Arbiter's mandibles tightened with a frustrated clench, "And where you go, you will be that much safer?"

"I want to find a quieter path to the Activation Room along that beach." She pointed her finger to the shoreline behind them. "If need be, lend me one of your men."

"No." Thel said.

Kalika curled her lip at him, "Who are you to have a say over me?"

The Arbiter pushed back his shoulders and tilted his head, "I am the Arbiter. I have every say over you." The Sangheili around him grunted in agreement.

Kalika snorted and turned around, "I will meet you there."

Thel's eyes widened, "Kalika, come back here!"

She was already disappearing into the brush of the jungle. Thel growled with irritation. He butted his muzzle toward one of his men without a Ghost, "Follow her. We will meet you at the Activation Room." The major nodded and trotted after Kalika.

Thel stared after the major and shook his head. He gripped the two joysticks under the hood of the Ghost and shoved them forward. The vehicle's engine hummed to life and grew warm quickly as plasma shot through its fuel lines. It shot forward and lurched toward the trodden path that sliced through the mountain as six other Ghosts followed closely behind.

Kalika grabbed hold of a rock that stuck up out of the top of the cliff side. She gazed down at the steep drop and estimated the probability of slipping and dying at the bottom. It seemed to be an 800 foot drop to sea-level. The slope was heavily abundant with tall green trees like the fur coat on a doarmir (**34**). She looked back at the major who trailed along behind her. Then she smiled, turned,

and jumped. The major shouted, "Wait!" and reached for her, but she was already touching down on the steep rock.

She tilted the pads of her feet, bent her knees, and dug her armored toes into the dirt as she rapidly slid down the cliff-side. She would jump lightly as momentum and gravity drug her down the slope. Balance held her upright with very coordinated positions of her feet. She spun around a tree and tapped down onto a thick root, leaping downward and reaching out with very long strides of her legs as she sped through the dispersed jungle. The dirt made loud scratching noises against her golden armor and sharp artificial toes. The wind buffeted against her face and the smell of the sea wafted up to her. She was nearly there-

One miss-step caused her to lose her footing and she rolled forward. She tightened her stomach as she threw herself over her shoulder, right down onto soft sand. Still, cold air was knocked out of her lungs and she moaned in pain, clasping her palm over the sticky spot on her suit. She lay there for a while, gazing up at the blue sky. Translucent, silver wisps of clouds rolled gently by on the quick currents of the wind. She closed her eyes for a moment, waiting for the air to return to her lungs. The hush of the sea could be heard below her feet, beckoning her spirit to a different place on the other side of the universe... to a different time...

Dark branches swatted at her face and scratched her skin, letting purple blood flow in thin rivers down her dress. She was panting frantically. Adrenaline was the only thing keeping her standing. The gun shot was quiet. It could not have been real. Could it? Was it? _Please, Gods... _she pleaded. Her feet carried her with whatever strength and speed that she had left in her body. _Please... please... please... _She shoved past the thin thorns that smacked her, clawing her back into the dark shadows. The two moons of Sanghelios, Suban and Qikost, provided her no guidance high up in the throne of their dark skies or in the light of their armies of glittering stars. She came to a clearing, where a small, tiny body rested peacefully in pools of onyx-colored blood.

She came to a halt. Her lungs forgot how to operate. Her heart pounded heavily in her head, which struggled to contemplate the scene before her. She slowly began to stagger forward with quiet whimpers emitting from her parted jaws. "...Ila?" She called. She fell onto her knees before the tiny body, making the black leaves on the ground crackle and shift below her. Tiny water droplets splattered on the little girl's head and arm, mixing with the blood and creating a murky purple liquid that slid to the dirt. Carved on her bloody arm, in Sangheili phonetics, were the words, "Think twice." She wrapped her arms around the tiny body. She clenched one fist in her clothing, and the other wrapped around her precious tiny hand.

Throughout the dark, empty corridors of Vadam keep came an unheard high pitched scream of anguish and torture, to which no one answered.

Kalika opened her eyes to the blue sky. There was a noise of shuffling and skittering above her. She inhaled slowly and looked to her left. Further down the beach, with a few outcries of, "Oof! Ow! Ouch!", flopped out the Sangheili Major, who joined her with limbs flailed about on the white sand.

"How kind of you to join me." She called.

"Hmrrph...uummph...urgh...agh..." He replied.

Kalika slowly rolled up onto her feet with a hand still on her wound, and began to look about the scenery. Two giant mountains rose up on either side of them, to which there was no beach that hugged their bases. The edge of a giant triangular structure could be seen to the far right. The Activation Room, no doubt. Immediate common sense would tell any intelligent creature to climb the mountain to the right...

However something caught her eye to the left. When she looked there, something small and miniature moved. She began to walk down the beach toward the left mountain. The major shook his head and sat up, brushing sand off of his helmet and armor. He looked around, and then frowned at her, "Should we not be going... that way?" He pointed toward the Activation Room.

"Look." She nodded toward the peaks of the mountain.

He got up and trotted after her. He squinted, "I see nothing."

She rolled her eyes and snorted. "I am going to trust my instincts on this one."

The major wrinkled his nose, "My instincts tell me to go to that mountain."

"I was never going to stop you or your misinterpreted instincts." She said in a stately manner.

"They are not misinterpreted!" He growled.

"Hmph." Kalika muttered and continued on. The major stopped and turned away as though he were truly considering walking away... but then he considered the instruction that the Arbiter gave him, and determined whether or not he would face his wrath. He grumbled something about "women" to himself, and followed her toward a small metal door in the side of the mountain.

* * *

><p>Sgt. Johnson was having a piss-off day today, and he didn't even have a cigar to chew on. Not that he was complaining, but his day could have gone better. Here he and his marines were, held captive by these damn Brutes, and their god-awful stench. Who knew where they were keeping Miranda... why Miranda? He ground his teeth together where his cigar was supposed to be.<p>

He was in a Forerunner cell. A transparent purple barrier separated the Marines from the larger room in the center, where they could see the other prison cells. Each cell was small and didn't provide much room. The other cells contained large Elites in silver and gold armor with weird, big hats. They seemed like important Elites, because he had never seen their kind in combat before.

How were they going to escape? He couldn't call back up. There was no signal in the cell. Their weapons had been taken away. He had to come

up with some sort of plan...

There was a loud yell somewhere down below, followed by loud gun zaps from plasma weapons and more yelling. Johnson sat off of the wall that he was leaning on and came up to the barrier, looking around to figure out what was going on.

A strange looking Elite ran out in front of him and ran a Brute's head through with an energy sword. He recognized this Elite... the female from the Library! An Elite in red armor followed closely behind her, covering her back with two red plasma rifles. The female... he couldn't remember her goddamn name... Kaylee or something. She approached the barrier and looked him straight in the eyes as he stared coolly back. She inquired skeptically, "Your female is held captive by Tartarus, and he is going to destroy this galaxy with the Halo. If I release you, will you help me?"

Johnson tilted his head and crossed his arms, "And why should I trust your betrayin' ass? You ran away and never showed back up at the Library..."

Kalika flashed her teeth at him, "I have no time, and you are the closest cell to me. I can move on. Do you want out of this cell, or not?"

Johnson turned his head, "Load up, boys!"

A younger marine (a damn twit who couldn't have been more than nineteen years old) piped up, "But we don't have anything to load up with!"

Sgt. Johnson shouted, "Shut up, Smith!"

Kalika slashed the barrier's generator with a fluid motion of her sword. The generator hissed and sparked and as the barrier disintegrated, the humans made strange "whoop"ing sounds. Kalika leaped off of the ramp and landed onto the ground on all fours. Reinforcements shouted along further down the halls, and the Councilors screamed at her from the cells, "Traitor!"

She lurched forward with a flashy show of her blade and whipped past the guards who fired their weapons upon her. Golden rain slammed the Jiralhanae into the floor, who were then trampled under the Marines' boots. The doors ahead parted, blinding them all with a bright blue sky and greeting them with a heavy wind gust.

Towering above Kalika, casting a dark shadow upon the second floor of the building, was a Scarab. She knew the machines well. The model was massive. Giant silver arms and legs held up a large body 80ft from the ground. One bright green eye at its head stared idly down at her. She did not want to miss her chance.

She stretched her legs out with swift cadence and agility across a gray balcony toward the Scarab. Without hesitation, she bent her knees and jumped up high, landing on one of the Scarab's arms. She climbed up into the body of the machine and scanned its first level. There were no signs of movement, and her radar said nothing. She flared her nostrils, inhaling the scents in the air. It was difficult to determine different scents in the strong odor of Jiralhane that stunk up the place, but she could detect a more intense, thin trail

leading down to the cabin of the Scarab. She activated her cloaking device and made her way slowly down a ramp into the control room. She turned the corner, stalked down another ramp...

...one...two, three Jiralhanae lazily sat about the cabin. One chortled and said, "Did you hear about Tho'lak?"

"No, what of him?"

"He was urinating when a Spartan assassinated him from behind."

The three Jiralhanae smirked for a second before exploding into uproarious laughter. They did not seem to care for their comrade, but found his death extremely humorous, nonetheless. A much higher, musical toned laugh joined their gruff chorus and did not match well at all with their sound. The Jiralhane frowned, stopped laughing, and looked around in confusion for the lone voice.

"Oh gods, that is hilarious!" A female voice rang out.

The Jiralhanae looked at each other and brought out their weapons. They drew close together into a huddle with their backs facing each other. The voice called out from the middle of their huddle, "We have the ability and technology to travel through space and colonize planets, but gods forbid that they make scent soaps for the Jiralhanae."

This comment was long enough to give them time to panic, turn, and fire their guns at the center. Kalika ducked as soon as the weapons fired above her head. Her cloaking device uncloaked just as three Jiralhanae bodies collapsed dead onto the ground around her. She slowly stood, waving her sword about to all corners of the room to ensure that they were the only three on the Scarab. She then deactivated the energy sword and sat upright, wiping and clapping her gloves together as she stepped over their bodies.

The cabin was very dark; a custom to all Covenant vehicles. The metal that encased the room was a dark purple color, and lights of different colors flashed on buttons and icons on panels. As she walked past rows of these panels, she came to the front of the cabin where a large screen took up almost the entire wall. This was the camera of real time outside. There, everything was still.

Kalika frowned and came forth. The Jiralhanae had taken the humans and held their hands behind their backs. Everything was very still. She could not hear what the Brutes were saying. It was not long before the doors into the prison opened and out came an army of raging Councilors.

And who was at their head, but the Arbiter. Kalika blinked in surprise. What were the chances? Thel, powerful in his stride, fired two plasma pistols into the enemy as the humans scattered from the Brutes and ran for the Scarab. Kalika could do nothing in the battle in the Scarab. If she fired the cannon, she would blow the whole balcony up. Even the mini cannons radius was too wide to risk firing.

"Damn! What happened here?!" She recognized the darker human's voice. She turned as the humans filed into the cabin.

"They were having a bit of a skirmish." Kalika said as she walked toward a control panel to her right, pressing buttons with clicks a low beeps.

"You know how to work this thing?" Johnson asked as he walked up to the large screen.

"Somewhat."

"That'll have to do. Does this thing have a broadcasting system?"

"Yes. Press this button here." Kalika motioned her finger toward a button right next to the large screen. Then she walked to the back of the cabin, "I will ready the Scarab for combat."

Johnson nodded and shouted, "Get my marines on the those guns, will ya?!" On the large screen, the Arbiter walked up to the Scarab on the balcony. Johnson pushed the button, held it, and spoke, "Listen. You don't like me, and I sure as hell don't like you." Kalika rose the meter bars on the plasma capacity engine screen, and the Scarab began to extend its four legs. The front cannon on the Scarab's head began to whine and brighten with a silver green light. Johnson continued, "But if we don't do something, Mr. Mohawk's gonna activate the ring. And we're all gonna die."

The Arbiter spoke sternly, "Tartarus has locked himself inside the control room."

"Well, I just happen to have a key." Johnson smiled. Kalika exercised the cannon arrays and motor controls. The Scarab gave low groans and chirrups as though it hadn't been used in a long time. "Come on! Grab a Banshee and give me some cover. 'Gonna know we're comin'!"

The Arbiter nodded and ran toward the Banshees on the left end of the balcony. Johnson pressed the broadcasting button again and turned around, "Elite! Get my men on some of these guns!"

Kalika wrinkled her muzzle and snorted at one of the marines closest to her, "You, come here."

The marine stared unsteadily at her before eventually coming forward. "Yeah?"

"This panel controls the focus cannon. It is the largest weapon on this Scarab." She swiped her hand across the blank panel. Lights flickered on and a monotone hologram of the landscape appeared. A half sphere began to glow near the bottom. "Only I can aim the cannon. When I tell you to fire, press down on the sphere to charge the weapon, and then release to fire. Do you unders-"

"Like this?"

The marine shoved down on the sphere with his palm. Kalika swatted his hand away just as the focus cannon charged briefly and fired. Kalika slowly turned her head to glare at the marine, whose eyes were wide and he slowly shirked away from the panel. Her pupils were tight and narrowed, "...I said..." Her voice rumbled deeply with a heavy growl, "...when _I _tell you to fire... _Do you_ understand?"

The marine swiftly nodded his head up and down. She curled her teeth, "Good."

She walked away and walked two other marines through working the two heavy plasma cannons. "They are positioned on either side of the Scarab. Aim using these two sticks, and fire using this sphere in the center. Simple enough?"

"Yes ma'am."

Kalika nodded, "The rest of you will need to cover us from the upper decks."

Johnson nodded as the last three marines saluted and ran up on deck. "Alright, let's go kick some ass!"

Driving a Scarab is not as hard as it sounds. Kalika came to this conclusion as she quickly became accustomed to the Scarab controls. There was another monotone hologram on this wider panel, much like the controls to the main cannon, but the screen was more detailed as far as coordinates, latitude, longitude, and distance were concerned. All she had to do was to either press a location on the hologram, or enter coordinates, for the Scarab to walk to on autopilot, or she could maintain tighter control with two spheres and one joystick at the bottom of the panel. It was like a Banshee... but with a bigger gun and a little bit more parts to control.

The landscape ahead was only a simple gray cliff that had a path carved through it. Wraiths, Banshees, and Ghosts populated the crag, as indicated in small red dots on both holograms. Thel flew ahead, firing his bombs and weapons upon the enemy, clearing a path for them. Kalika pressed down on the two spheres and rolled them forward. The Scarab heaved all 3,500 tons of itself forward with a groan.

Johnson wiped a finger under his nose to get at an itch as he patrolled the deck. When he approached Kalika, he asked, "How is this thing moving? It can't all run on plasma..."

Kalika shook her head, "The Scarab has too many complex parts to run on plasma fuel lines. Most Covenant vehicles and spacecraft run purely off of plasma cores, but the Scarabs required something more flexible."

Johnson arched his eyebrow, "Such as?"

"Lekgolo colonies."

"Legos?!"

"No, lekgolo. They are small intelligent, orange worm-like creatures. They make up the Mgalekgolo, or as your kind call them, the Hunters. When they are banded together, they are extremely powerful and dangerous."

"Hunters are worm things?" The sergeant chuckled, "The more you know..."

Kalika smiled, "Yes. These holograms communicate with the lekgolo's nervous systems, who talk to each other and make the machine move,

like so."

"YYEEEEAAAAAAHHHH!" One of the marines yelled as he pounded at his cannon. Kalika arched an eye ridge at the human, who seemed very happy to be shooting things with a big powerful gun.

"Um...sir?" One of the marines called from the upper decks. "There are a shit ton of Elites up here... but they're on our side. What do we do with 'em?"

Johnson frowned, "Say what?" He walked up the ramps to the upper decks, and sure enough, there were about ten to twelve Elites with big fancy hats up there. "Uhhhh..." Johnson scratched his head, "You all without guns should probably come downstairs... so you don't get...blown up..."

One of the marines stood next to Johnson, "Nah, nah, Sergeant, you gotta speak to them in their language." The marine cupped his hands by his lips and called out really loud, "Wort! Wort! Worthy wort wort wort wort!"

Johnson looked at the other two marines, who shrugged their shoulders at him. Then he looked to the Elites, who did not seem amused by the marine.

One of the Elites with the big fancy hats slowly walked forward with a sword held at his side. He towered above the marine with a very calm expression. Johnson quietly reached for his gun, just in case he was going to try something. Then the Elite withdrew his sword and said in a voice that was deep even for a Sangheili, "We are perfectly capable of understanding your commander in his language." He bowed his head toward Johnson and walked on past toward the ramp. The rest of the Elites followed suit.

Johnson swatted his hand across the "worting" marine's head. "Stop making a fool out of yourself, Smith! Stay up here with the others. You embarrass me."

Johnson walked back down deck as Smith looked guiltily around at the others, who glared at him. He shrugged his shoulders, "What?"

Kalika looked around as the cabin suddenly felt very crowded. "Who-?"

The same Sangheili that had spoken before spoke again, "I am Zakar 'Crolun. I was a commander of a V1 Scarab before I was a Councilor. Will you allow me to handle the equipment?" Kalika had turned her body toward him after setting the Scarab on a brief autopilot mode. He frowned at her when he observed her waist, "You are injured. Please rest. We will handle everything."

Kalika hesitated, but suddenly felt very tired when he said this to her. She nodded and allowed him the controls. She was feeling a little claustrophobic anyway. The other Councilors began to tap the humans on the shoulders, taking control of the cannons and aiding with the security. Kalika began to walk up the ramps, passing by Johnson, and walking across the upper decks.

The Scarab swayed steadily on through the crag. Up ahead, she could see a beaten up Banshee flying through heavy fire. Thel. She looked

around. She did not have any operating weapons. She walked to the edge of the deck where there were no rails. Looking down, she could see remnants of the battle... and a perfectly fine looking Banshee in the shadows. A sly smile crawled across her mandibles.

Within a matter of minutes and with a few long jumps, she was down on the ground, and the next, she was in the air. Her Banshee came spiraling toward Thel's, and fired upon the assailants.

Thel looked up in confusion. A traitor? Reinforcements were coming, perhaps? Whoever it was was helping him... he supposed that he did not mind. The Activation Room was just ahead. Two more enemy Banshees flew in from the direction of the grand structure and fired their weapons on him. As Kalika and Thel fought together in the air, Johnson called out on the broadcasting system, "Stay clear of the doors!"

With a low hum, the focus cannon at the head of the Scarab began to spread its arrays like a blossoming flower and hummed with energy. "Hey bastards!" Johnson shouted. "Knock knock!"

The focus cannon aimed at the small doors of the Activation room, which just so happened to be located about fifty feet up on a mountain. With a low boom, the focus cannon fired a bright blue-green ray of plasma. Three times again, it recharged and fired until the doors exploded into glistening flame and black smoke.

Thel turned his Banshee and flew straight for the doorway with Kalika hot on his tail. The fire and smoke cleared quickly and dissipated into the air just as the two Banshees flew onto the balcony and dispensed their riders onto the ground. Thel landed first and ran toward the melted, but nonetheless open door way.

Kalika activated her cloaking device and snuck in after him. She stepped over burning debris and slid past collapsed and narrow hallways. She looked up to-

Thel activated his blade, spun around, and grabbed the invisible Sangheili around the throat. He slammed it up against a melted wall and drew his blade up against its throat. "Show yourself, assassin!" He growled.

Kalika's cloak fell away and she clasped her hands weakly around his wrists. "Thel!" She croaked and kicked her legs desperately. His eyes widened as he released her in shock. She began to collapse, but he instinctively reached out with his arm and caught her. He let his blade fall to the floor and pulled her up against him.

"...Kalika! How...? Wh-Why? How did you...?" He slowly fell to his knees and held her close to his chest. "What are you doing here?" He asked, suddenly breathing very heavily.

She held his forearm and smiled softly. "Surprise!" She said weakly, resting her head on his bicep. "You must really like me, because you keep appearing out of nowhere..." She chuckled.

He managed a weak, tired smile and began to hold her up. "Tartarus has the Index and will activate the Halo at any moment. We must hurry. Stay with me."

Kalika nodded and stood. They both quietly zig-zagged through the hallway until it opened up into a wide corridor, that appeared to be untouched by the Scarab's cannon. They both activated their cloaking devices and spanned the room. Five Jiralhanae patrolled the area and guarded two doors, speaking in quiet voices. Thel's blade flew through the air and sliced through the back of the throat of one of the guards in the further corner. Kalika waited for the Brutes to focus on the Arbiter before sweeping up an energy sword from the floor and charging into the fray.

* * *

><p>"Chieftain! The Arbiter! He is coming!" A Jiralhanae shouted as he barreled down a lone ramp toward the giant structure in the center. A thick circular platform took up most of the room. A glowing panel with blue and green lights blinked on and off. Tartarus curled his lips and held Miranda firmly, "Come, female. Put in the Icon. Begin the Great Journey!"<p>

Miranda refused to speak and looked away. Tartarus snarled, "Do not make this hard, human. I have been kind for a long time... I can crush your skull into thousands...millions of pieces in my bare palm. Come human, it is easy. Take the Icon into your hands," he motioned her hands with the Icon and gently nudged her toward the socket. "...and do as you are told!" He growled, grinding his hand on her shoulder.

The Oracle, wrapped under the arm of one of the Brutes surrounding Tartarus, cried out, "Please! Use Caution! This Reclaimer is delicate!"

"ONE MORE WORD, ORACLE!" Tartarus roared, turning his head and glaring at the machine with a wide red eye, "AND I'LL RIP YOUR EYE FROM ITS SOCKET!" This made him clamp down harder on Miranda's shoulder, to which she responded with a heavy groan of pain.

Tartarus leaned in toward her ear, lowering his voice, "Which is nothing compared to what I will do to you..."

"Tartarus!" A familiar voice shouted. "Stop!"

Tartarus' eyes widened, "Impossible!" He growled as he whirled around.

"Put down the Icon." The Arbiter said calmly as he walked forward.

"Put it down? And disobey the Hierarchs?" Tartarus sneered. The Brute squad around him, carrying their red banners, nodded and bore their teeth at the Arbiter. Kalika, cloaked, walked past Thel, and made her way behind the Jiralhanae.

"There are things about Halo even the Hierarchs do not understand." Thel shook his head.

The Brutes growled and roared at this comment. Tartarus held up his hand to silence them before turning to glare at the Arbiter. "Take care, Arbiter. What you say is heresy!"

Thel's eyes softened at the word, "Is it? Oracle, what is Halo's purpose?"

The Oracle happily chirped up, "Collectively, the seven-"

Tartarus swiped the Oracle away from the guard holding it and held it firmly in his grasp so that it could see him. He roared, "NOT ANOTHER WORD!"

"Please!" Sgt. Johnson yelled, and silence fell. He spoke, waving his carbine to the monitor. "...Don't shake the light bulb. If you want to keep your brains in your head, I'd tell those boys to chill!" He said firmly to Tartarus. Then he calmly turned his head to Thel, "Go ahead. Do your thing."

Thel nodded and looked to the Oracle, "The sacred rings; what are they?"

"Weapons of last resort built by the Forerunners to eliminate potential Flood hosts, thereby rendering the parasite harmless."

Thel pressed on. "And those who made the rings? What happened to the Forerunners?"

The monitor tilted its levitating head, "After exhausting every other strategic option, my creators activated the rings. They and all additional sentient life in three radii of the galactic center died... as planned." It tilted its head again as the entire room suddenly felt heavy with disbelief and thought. "...Would you.. like to see the relevant data?"

Thel looked sorrowfully to the Chieftain, "...Tartarus... the Prophets have betrayed us..."

The large Brute seemed overwhelmed. His eyes flickered from side to side and he would not look anyone in the eye. So he did the only thing he could think of. He spun, grabbed Miranda's hands, and shoved the Sacred Icon down into the panel. "No, Arbiter! The Great Journey has begun!" Miranda dove out of the way as the Sacred Icon sunk down into its socket. Tartarus hefted his hammer up into both hands and put out his chest, "And the Brutes, not the Elites, shall be the Prophet's escort!"

The circular platform began to shift and groan. The structure began to split into three different levels, and wide metal arms rose up around them. The arms began to revolve around the hole in the center, where a bright light began to glow and shot up through the ceiling. Crates flew across the platform as it began to spin.

The battle of the Halo had begun.

Loud battle cries came from behind Thel. Many councilors uncloaked and joined the battle. They charged the Brutes with the Arbiter at their head. Red, blue and gold lights reflected off of the enormous silver arms revolving around them. The machine that the battle commenced on was humming softly as its complex structure rotated on its axis.

Kalika ran along the uppermost level of the structure, circling

around the battlefield until she found Tartarus. She could see Thel fighting in the distance, trying to get through the squad to the Chieftain. She saw the wretched Brute wrestling with a Sangheili at the center of the structure. She jumped and landed on all fours behind him.

Tartarus turned with a dark shadow upon his grizzled snout. "Ah... the Arbiter's play toy..."

Kalika gave little reaction to this insult except for a small wrinkle in her muzzle with a sly smile, "I would rather be a toy of the Arbiter than a puppet of a Prophet..." she said as she stood. "...unlike you."

Tartarus smirked at this comeback as he readied his hammer for a strike. "I shall send you back to the depths of hell from which you came, Kalika 'Vadamai."

Kalika lurched forward with a flourish of her energy blade. Its two points were aimed straight for his heart. He stepped to the side and grabbed her arm, yanking her forward toward the center. She rotated her arm and managed to slip out of his grasp with a twist of his wrist. She swung her other arm and punched him hard in the jaw. Tartarus roared and swung his hammer at her. She ducked, spun on her heel and slashed his leg with the very tip of her sword. His shield never flared, but it absorbed the damage completely. He stumbled back and turned, running to the edge of the platform. Kalika charged with a powerful gait and leaped up, aiming for his neck-

He reached over his shoulder, grabbed her arm just before she could strike, and threw her down onto the hard metal. Her helmet made contact with a loud clang. She blinked in confusion and fumbled to her feet.

Tartarus thrust out his hand and wrapped it as tightly as he could around her throat just after he kicked her energy sword over the edge. The sword spun through the air and the last of its blue glow disappeared into the blackness below.

Kalika dug her artificial claws into his bare arm. He held her over the dark shadow below, curling his lips in a snide sneer as he turned his head to look at the Arbiter. The tall Sangheili, panting and battle-weary put up his hand.

"Tartarus... do not-"

"Drop your weapons, Arbiter. And tell all of your men as well." Tartarus growled.

Thel gave a worried look to Kalika. She tilted her head to look back at him...

...and gave him a brief wink.

Thel's eyes widened as Kalika lifted her leg high and kicked Tartarus hard in the throat when his shields were down. He released her to hold his neck. Thel was much too far away to catch her.

She plummeted into the depths of the Quarantine Zone, with a booming roar of despair echoing down after her.

****Author's Notes****

****33)** ****The human race were the chosen heirs of the Forerunners; in order to take their place and care for all life in the universe; to take the Mantle after the Forerunner's demise. Their machines are programmed to recognize the human race as their masters, otherwise known as Reclaimers.**

****34**)** Doarmir are large, dark haired mammals that are native to Sanghelios.

13. Log 12

CONSORT

of the

HERETIC

Created by Cyber and Zmori

Edited by ShoopWoop17

****WARNING: Gore Alert****

/Access Data Logs

Year 2552, November 6th

Location Unknown

2:31 Hours

Log 12

The air... Gods, the stinking
air.

Ssss...shhhhhh...ssssssss...shhhhhhhh...

Her breathing sounded so loud in her head that it gave her a headache. She moaned softly and moved her hand to her forehead, only to wince and take her hand away. That hurt too.

'Vadam blinked softly. It was dark. Her surroundings cast shifting shadows all around her, like black spirits roaming about aimlessly, lost in webs of dimension and time. Her muzzle ached. Her entire head throbbed painfully. She moaned again. Her arms felt heavy and she couldn't feel her legs. Where was she...?

She gazed at the shadows sliding along the walls...the moving walls. The walls contracted and expanded like a living creature. Orange, swollen spheres spewed out sickly yellow spores of some sort. Giant sacs were strangely floating up from the floor, swaying back and forth. Kalika very slowly came to the conclusion that she was inside a structure completely overtaken by Flood biomass.

There was a bright flicker of light in the darkness. She squinted her

eyes. It was a bright blue light that appeared and then disappeared rapidly.

...It was an upside down blue woman who walked across the ceiling. A human woman, and yet she was not human. It was as if she were looking at a projection. The blue woman had short purple-blue hair that hung at the middle of her neck and was layered shorter toward the back.

It was a human's AI. Bright purple lines moved across her body in a very uniform manner, pulsing randomly like a heartbeat. The AI looked at her with very sad eyes...brilliant, bright, blue-purple eyes. Kalika stared back with the same...brilliant, bright, purple-blue eyes...her pupils narrowed into black slits in response to the AI's approaching glow.

After a long moment of the silence, the AI whimpered, "...Sister."

Kalika, after a thoughtful pause, responded in a much deeper voice than the AI's, "Sister."

"Why are you here?" The AI asked. "He's going to hurt you."

"Why are you upside down?" Was all Kalika had to ask.

"I'm not upside down. You are." The blue lady sighed, "You should not have come here. The Gravemind wants-"

A loud bellow shook the room. The AI gave Kalika a frightened look and disappeared. Kalika closed her eyes as her body shook. Whatever was binding her legs dropped her hard onto the ground. Her armor made loud noises on the metal floor, and then she moaned again.

Her head was spinning and her legs felt like they were on fire. She grabbed her snout as blood flowed and pulsed horribly throughout her arteries and veins. She stayed like that for a long time, waiting for her eyes to stop feeling like they were being sucked into the back of her head.

Someone grabbed her hard by the shoulders. She opened her eyes with difficulty and flung her arms at the assailant. She suddenly felt very sick as she was lifted up from the floor, thrust down on a bony shoulder, and carried down the chamber.

Eventually, she was hefted into a room that resembled a prison on a Covenant ship. Her body had finally adjusted to being right-side-up again. She was being held by a Flood infected Sangheili. Looking around, the room was small and very dark. The only things in the room were a long rusty table resting against the left wall and what looked like four open cuffs on the back wall. The walls were very dull looking; wires poked out of the black crevices in the purple metal. The floor was covered in gray, green biomass.

Kalika dug her elbows into the Sangheili's rib cage, from which it loosened its grip on her, allowing her feet to touch the ground and stomp on its disfigured toes. It very slowly released her into the prison room.

Kalika flashed her teeth and faced the parasite, "What do you want?"

Why am I not infected like the others?"

The Sangheili only stared at her blankly. Kalika slowly backed up with her fists raised. Shadows emerged from behind the parasite...humans. They charged her, shrieking loudly and flailing their limbs about. Kalika roared and pounded her fists at the swarm surrounding her, lashing out with kicks when she had the chance. The Sangheili had come up behind her and hooked his arms under her own. He lifted her up off of the ground. She spat at the parasites as they hooked their dexterous fingers around her shiny armor. They flung her helmet to the floor and clawed off her shoulder guards, tearing her suit along with it. Off came the rigid chest piece and her leg plating was torn to shreds. Kalika kicked and thrashed, roaring angrily. The Sangheili holding her threw her to the ground, and before she could get up, stomped down his heel into her lower back.

She couldn't breathe. She gasped in desperate, hollow breaths with spread jaws, digging her claws into the oozing floor. The human parasites were unclasping her boots and continued to shove her around, tearing her suit apart. Her gloves were sharply removed from her wrists, revealing smooth blunt nails on her finger tips.

The Sangheili parasite lifted her up and slammed her body up against the back wall of the cell. The human Flood scuttled around, fastening her wrists and ankles into the cuffs. The cuffs clicked and glowed purple as they locked.

Kalika blinked, dazed, and jerked her limbs in the cuffs. Her lungs felt like they had collapsed. Her suit was dismantled. All that was left of it were scraps that hung over her groin and shreds that fell down her hips, and draped from her elbows and neck. Her bare stomach was splattered with dry and crusted blood from her wound. She looked up, "...What do you want of me?"

The Sangheili parasite brandished an energy sword, raising it steadily before him. As he steadily approached, gazing at her with dead white eyes, a quaking voice said; _Your mind_.

The tip of the energy blade drew closer to the swollen scar on her belly. She began to cry out when the mere heat of the plasma blade seared her skin. The very ends of the sword gently slid into the darkest part of her bloodied wound, enticing agonizing screams from her shuddering jaws.

The screams echoed down the halls of the ship where none would listen, save one. Cortana watched from the corner of the hallway.

The parasite took away the sword. He slowly turned and walked away. Kalika shivered uncontrollably, gasping for the wretched air. Her stomach remained tense and sucked in. Her jaws were clenched together and her hands were curled tightly into fists. Her wound had swelled again, and the skin around it was nearly black and purple, moist with sweat. Her head was throbbing again and felt very heavy.

She curled her lips and a rattling growl rumbled into her throat. She opened her eyes and spit at the parasite, who dismissively walked down the corridor.

* * *

><p>...How many days had it been?<p>

She didn't care to keep track. It would only make her feel more hopeless. She had remained on this wall for many days with no interaction from anything or anybody. Did anybody know where she was? Would anybody care? Both irrelevant questions that rummaged about in her head. Kalika was never the kind of spirit who waited around from somebody else to save her. Not many Sangheili were. It was the Sangheili way. She was very determined to be self-reliant when she escaped from the Covenant ship. She just had to figure out a plan to escape.

A bright glow emerged from the shadows. The blue woman had returned. Kalika lifted her head in acknowledgment. The AI approached her, gazing at her wound. "...You should not have come."

"You say this," she gasped, "as though I had a choice." Kalika responded softly. After a long hiatus of silence, she breathed out hoarsely, "What is your name?"

The AI's image flickered as she responded, "Cortana."

Kalika blinked at this name, "You belong to the Master Chief...how did you come here?"

Cortana's image glitched for a few moments before she responded, "The Gravemind had sent us to High Charity, where we chased down the Prophet of Truth. I told him to leave me behind so that he could follow Truth on to a Forerunner Dreadnaught headed toward Earth. The Flood had overrun High Charity and took hold of the entire system..." Cortana paused, looking down. "Thousands were taken by the Flood...none escaped..." She gazed up at Kalika, "I'm sorry...your kind-

"-are not my kind." Kalika said coldly.

Cortana looked at her in surprise, "What do you mean?"

"I...only mean that I am not saddened nor... angered by their demise."

"Why not? You're one of them."

Kalika lifted her head weakly, "You are a computer. Surely, you understand."

Cortana seemed almost hurt by this statement. She backed away and sat in the corner of the room. "I was created from a human mind... I find it hard for a civilized being to not care for her own kind."

"I never said that I did not care." Kalika said. Cortana's expression darkened in confusion. "Just because I am not sad or upset by their deaths does not mean that I did not care for them. I simply recognize that there was nothing that I could do, and that they have moved on."

Cortana wrapped her arms around her knees, "Sounds pretty heartless to me."

Kalika made a quiet wincing sound, "Do they feed us here?"

Cortana looked around, "I don't know. I only know that they want you alive... but why?" She looked at the strange-skinned Elite. "Who are you?"

Kalika smirked, "That is what I would like to know."

Cortana reworded her question, "What's your name?"

The Elite breathed slowly before answering, "Kalika
'Vadam."

Cortana's image disappeared shortly and flickered back into existence. "What's a female Elite doing so far away from Sanghelios? I thought females weren't allowed to war."

Kalika was silent for a long time with her head hung low and eyes closed.

"...Kalika?" Cortana asked.

"Hm?"

"Why are you here?"

"My husband was... going to be executed before the citizens and officials of High Charity..." She seemed to be having trouble with breathing. "... for committing heresy..."

"...Heresy?"

"...allowing... the Demon to destroy the sacred Halo ring..."

Cortana's eyes widened, "...the Demon? Chief? Your husband was executed because of us?" Cortana asked.

"He was going to be, yes. I came to save him, but I failed to reach him... the Prophet of Truth spared his life in order to use him for a supposed 'greater cause'...crowning him Arbiter."

Cortana stared at Kalika in bewilderment and said softly in an awe-struck way, "...You're the Arbiter's wife."

Kalika opened her eyes slowly as if her eyelids weighed many pounds, "Yes..." After a long pause, she blinked her weary eyelids tiredly.

"Do you have kids?"

"...kids?"

"Yes... like children?"

"Oh..." Kalika's eyes widened a little and brightened at the word, "...yes."

"What are their names?"

Kalika remained silent only for a few moments, struggling to remember... "Ral is the oldest... he served in High Charity..."

"You have a son in the service?"

"Two, actually... Ral and Sain... the next eldest is Thesa... then Len... Lakei and Jovah... Treya... the twins, Mena and Sena...Xeno...Crea...then Netu and D'san..."

Cortana's eyes gradually began to widen, "How many do you have?!"

Kalika wrinkled her muzzle and furrowed her eyeridges together in concentration, "...Twenty three, I think now?"

Cortana's jaw dropped. "...T-t-twenty three?! How...How do you fight?...How are you alive?"

Kalika chuckled softly, "You would not believe me if I told you."

The AI stared at her in disbelief, "Surely, you mean the children of your husband's other wives?"

"The Arbiter has only one mate."

Cortana blinked at her, "Kalika... how old are you?"

"Sixty-seven revolutions."

Cortana continued to stare at her. "...You are a curious creature, Kalika... and it seems like you have quite the story to t-"

A low groan echoed down the hall. Cortana leaped to her feet and gave Kalika a terrified expression, "You can't tell them!" Then disappeared.

Kalika hung her head wearily and closed her eyes. Her wrists and ankles itched under the rusting metal that bound her limbs. If she did not die of infection from her scar, she would die of starvation or worse.

When she opened her eyes, she found herself staring into the pale white eyes of the Sangheili parasite. The cuffs chirped and unlocked, dropping Kalika to the ground. She fell to her knees and grunted. The parasite wrapped its long fingers around her throat and lifted her up with ease. Kalika called out in pain to deaf ears. He thrust her face down onto the table against the left wall, bending her body over the edge.

"_Where is the machine?_"

"Go to hell." Kalika growled.

The parasite held up what looked like a broken gravity hammer. It crushed her forearm in a titan grip that she failed to pull away from and lifted the hammer.

With no restraint, hesitation, or holding back, the hammer came down and crushed her thumb on the joint. A blood curdling scream burst forth from her widened jaws, but not one tear watered her eyes.

"_Where is the machine?"_

"Up your slimy ass." She hissed between clenched teeth.

With all of its strength, the parasite slammed the hammer down on the next finger. Kalika screamed again and writhed around, her face tight and contorted with agony. Her hand shivered uncontrollably and the other hand clawed at the parasite's arm desperately. She tightened her mandibles and bore her fangs in defiance. Her two fingers were already swelling and turned a frightening black color. There was a haunting silence that answered her low winces and grunts.

"_What does the machine foresee?"_

"Your pitiful death." Kalika wheezed.

CRACK!

She kicked her head back and let loose another outcry, quickly grinding her teeth and turning it into a series of angry growls and roars. She jerked and yanked her arm away, but the parasite only tightened his grip in response. It slammed her down again and straightened her arm back out.

"_What is the coming apocalypse?"_

Kalika glared at the parasite and spread her jaws, spitting directly into its eye. Blinding pain flared across her second thumb and again she screamed, weakly thrashing and tugging away.

"_How is the machine preparing?"_

"It does not... matter." She choked, smiling in a crooked and strange way. "You will never be ready."

The parasite set down the hammer and slammed a deformed fist into her cheekbone. She roared lividly, flinging her good hand at the Sangheili's throat. He grabbed her shoulder in one hand, rolling her over onto her back and stabbed his claws behind her bottom jaws. She shrieked as he slowly drew his nails across her face. Thick purple liquid streamed down her throat in dark rivulets. She had to close her left eye to avoid getting blood in it. The parasite took his hand away and stood by idly.

"_It is not worth dying for...not worth fighting for... I can give you peace, if you will only answerâ€¦|"_

Kalika slowly began to sit up, narrowing her one pupil at the parasite, "I am not... done yet."

His fist flew and punched her in the mandibles. Her head flung back and hit the cold metal of the table hard. She moaned and lifted her hand to her mouth. The parasite grabbed her around the neck and carried her again to the wall, locking her limbs in place.

"_I will break your obstinate spirit soonâ€¦|"_

The parasite snorted in a disgusting manner and walked away. Kalika weakly lifted her head, staring after the tall shadow of the Sangheili. Then she spoke softly in a rasping voice, "You... can break every bone in my body..." The Sangheili slowed to a stop at the archway without turning. Kalika did not get any louder, but her intensity had increased, "You can drain away...the very last of my blood... suck away the last of my breath... and take away all that I hold most dear..."

She curled her lips and flashed her fangs, glaring at his back with wide and enraged eyes, "But...you can _never_...break me..."

A voice echoed back;

"_We will seeâ€¦|"_

And the parasite was gone.

* * *

><p>She could not sleep. She could not remember the last time that she had slept or eaten. Blood had dried on her face and throat, making it irritably itchy. Her shoulders, throat, chest, and face were covered with angry bruises. It felt like months had gone by, each day drawn out with the most gruesome torture. All eight of her fingers were swollen and stuck out at strange angles. She knew that she had a few broken ribs. She could feel them every time she breathed. Her wrists and ankles were purple with bruises and blood from the tight metal cuffs. The scar on her belly had turned a strange black color. What was left of her suit stank of blood and urine. Her four toes were bruised, similar to her fingers. Burn marks blackened her back, some resembling the Mark of Shame and others resembling claw marks. It hurt to move anything, and it hurt to stay still. She could not open her eyes nor sleep. She was so hungry that she would puke. Every now and then, she would whimper softly, wincing at the aches and the pains.<p>

"...Kalika?" A soft voice called.

She did not reply, respond, nor acknowledge Cortana's voice.

Cortana observed her, trying to hide her disgust as she stepped away from pools of waste and vomit. She walked in front of the Elite, gaping at her wounds. She listened to her rattling breathing, all the while questioning how she was alive.

"Kalika...I'm being taken away...to a different location... I need you to leave a message for me. I-" Cortana suddenly screamed in pain, startling Kalika. The AI fell to her knees and grabbed at her head. When she regained herself, she gasped loudly, "It needs to go to the Master Chief..." She panted and pointed toward the only corridor connecting to the prison room. "It's recorded in a panel just out there... I know you're not in the best...condition, but can you point it to him when he finds you?"

Kalika frowned in confusion, "What are you-?" She tried to ask, but all that came out was air.

Cortana suddenly shrieked in pain again and the room rocked. It shuddered and jerked, tossing the table across the room. Cortana disappeared. What was she doing?! The cuffs unlocked, throwing Kalika forward onto the floor. She cried out as her body screamed in protest at the sudden movement. She lay on the floor, praying to whatever gods would listen that it would end soon.

* * *

><p>She woke up in the floor of the corridor. She slowly opened her eyes, gazing dully at the dark wall opposite of her. How long was she unconscious? Computer screens and panels blinked dim lights down at her. Only one of them was online. She had to get up and retrieve Cortana's message... but she just wanted to lie there. She did not want to get up. Everything hurt and everything told her to give up; to surrender.<p>

And that was exactly why she had to get up.

She growled violently and slowly dragged her leg across the cold metal floor, then the other. She tried to scream in pain as she crawled on elbows and knees toward the computer, but her voice was so hoarse from screaming so much that she had no voice. She clenched her teeth and continued to push herself, crying out in quiet agony, but not faltering. Not yet. When she finally got there, she propped herself up on her elbows with teeth-grinding grunts and squinted at the screen. Cortana had left the file open for her.

A low beep sounded on the panel beside her. She very slowly turned her aching neck toward the flashing radar. Two yellow triangles slid across the circular screen among a sea of red circles. The screen above the panel automatically flipped to a real-time mode, showing her the outside.

It seemed like she was looking out the port side of a Covenant cruiser that had crashed onto a cliff. On the cliff was a swarming army of Flood, and fighting through them were none other than the Master Chief and...

...the Arbiter.

Kalika made a weak wincing sound as her hearts beat a little softer. She looked back at Cortana's file. There were multiple options that were made available, but with a deep inhale, she lifted her broken fingers toward the screen and yelped airily when she touched the button that read, "Transfer." Another window appeared, asking for which port of the ship that the information needed to be transferred to. She clenched her teeth and selected, "All". She tried to release a shriek of pain and yanked her shattered fingers back. She collapsed onto the ground and hugged her dying body on the floor. She curled her lips in anger at herself for being so weak. She growled instead of wincing and whimpering.

"Transferring..." The screen read. Kalika looked back at the cameras. The Arbiter was gone and had left behind a trail of Flood bodies.

She stopped growling and called out with any strength that she had left, "Here!" Her voice was so hoarse from screaming that she could barely manage a whisper. "Here!" She cried again, but her voice was

cracked and dry. She wanted to hit something in frustration, but her hands were shivering with pain already.

She lay there on the floor, helpless and left to rot in her anguish. She wanted the pain gone, but more than anything, she wanted him to find her. "Here..." She tried harder. Her throat flared up with burning pain as if molten lava had been poured down her esophagus. There were so many voices in her head that told her that he would never come, that this was where everything ended, that this was the end... and yet... despite the impossibility of everything, she still cried, "...Here!" She fought to keep her eyes open, and desperately screamed even when she had no voice, "Please...here...please...here..." Her eyes became heavy and her hearts beat weakly in her ears...

He could smell her. There was no mistake. The ship seemed empty of the parasite except for the thick grey biomass that grew along the walls. He made low huffing sounds as he hurriedly searched through the rooms of the ship. It was impossible... he saw her fall, but there was, without a doubt, a trace of her scent on this ship. "Kalika?!" He called frantically. He had left the Master Chief behind with his AI when he caught the faint drift of her scent... and to his fear, the scent her blood.

He walked past a room, but stopped when he heard a very quiet noise. He had to really listen and quiet his heavy breathing to hear it. It was a very soft hissing noise.

"Come back!" She wanted to scream, but all that came was painful hot air. She felt her lungs would burst if she pushed any harder to cry out to him. "Here!" She rasped, trying to move her limbs. However, this only caused her immense pain and her body froze in response.

He turned back and looked into the dark control room. There, on the floor, was a deformed shadow of a Sangheili. He had suddenly lost the ability to breathe and his eyes widened in disbelief.

She didn't want him to see her, helpless and broken on the floor, but she felt so relieved when his silhouette returned in the doorway. She wailed again with half the volume of a whisper, "Here!"

Thel slowly began to walk forward, disbelieving his eyes at first. A wave of relief mixed with terrifying dread washed over him all at once in a very overwhelming way. She was alive! How?! Why?! Was it a sick trick? Was she infected? No... her scent was clean. He spread his arms as he fell to his knees before her. He released a slow moan of despair as his horrified eyes trailed her mangled body. A smeared blood trail came from her, to the control panels, to a hallway behind her like she had dragged her body. One of her eyes were black and swollen shut with dried blood caking her eyelids. Two of her mandibles were dislocated and several of her teeth were broken. Claw marks ran across her gorgeous face and her two operating mandibles were twitching. Her bruised chest was shivering with irregular breaths. Gods... her hands... he could see the whites of her bones that jutted out at the joints and her skin was grey with infection. Her nails were a dark black if not shattered. Her ribs stuck out with malnutrition and her belly... the old scar was very swollen and black, but not infected... her left ankle joint was dislocated and her toes were broken. The blood... it was so dry and there was so much of it that he could see more of the blood than her true dark

grey-blue skin. He could see nothing of her light colored freckles that always seemed like stars against her dark skin.

"Hhhhhh...!" She rasped.

"Shh..." Thel said quietly. He just wanted to wrap her up in his arms... stroke his fingers along her soft cheeks and fit them where they fit perfectly in between her own. But he knew that he couldn't, for fear that he would only cause her more pain. "Do not speak, love... I am here... just hold on. I will get help as soon as I can."

Kalika made a quiet whimpering sound. At last, he had found her. She felt so happy to see him before she went. Looking up into his concerned gaze... with those handsome golden eyes... she could feel herself slipping away. She could still hear his voice.

"Rtas, I need your crew with a transport table here now, and a Phantom just outside..."

But he started to fade away as well. She found herself thinking that she would not mind if she died like this... although, she would have liked to kiss him before she left... to tell him three important words that she never told him as much as she should have.

She closed her one eye tiredly before she could tell him what they were...

14. Log 13

CONSORT

of the

HERETIC

Created by Cyber and Zmori

Edited by ShoopWoop17

/Access Data Logs

Year 2553, July 4th

Infinity, orbiting Sanghelios

7:29 Hours

Log 13

She had been laying in the subconscious of her mind for days, struggling to the surface. Not that she minded the calm darkness, but like all things, it eventually got boring. Somewhere inside, she wanted to be awake. And when she finally reached the surface, she heard strange noises. There were annoying high pitched beeping sounds and there was a very low rushing noise below her.

Kalika began to open her eyes, but closed them briefly. Too bright. She blinked until her eyes adjusted to the light. She felt very

stiff. She didn't like it at all. When she finally maintained her vision, she found herself staring at a strange white square ceiling. In fact, everything she looked at was white. The tall machines that stood next to her were white, as were the computer panels on the right wall. A translucent glass wall was in front of her bed on which she lay, and on the left wall was a wide window.

...Did she die? Was this the beginning of the next journey?

There was a higher pitched rushing sound somewhere near her feet. When she looked, she saw the most unexpected creature walk in. A human in white robes nervously smiled at her.

Nevermind. She was in hell.

"Good morning, miss Vadam," the human said. Kalika's arms flew up and jerked a white alien mask off of her face. Her head suddenly felt heavy and she blinked as blood redistributed throughout her vessels. She looked at her arms and her eyes shot open. In horror, she gaped at the tubes stuck into the inside of her forearms. She frantically tore them out of her arms and stood up. The human ran toward a wall and pressed a button on some sort of speaker system, yelling, "We need a support team down here now!"

She would have killed him, but she had become aware of more tubes up her...what was she wearing?! A white gown of some sort... an ugly gown...

She lifted up the gown and gasped when she saw even more tubes in her belly. She didn't care to notice that her scars and bruises were nearly gone. She roared in rage and tore the tubes out of her abdomen.

"No, no! Don't do that! You'll hurt yourself!" The human yelled and hurried to approach her, but Kalika gave him a stolid glare and hissed with recalcitrance. He put up his palms to show that he meant no harm, "Please! Just lie down on the bed! We're trying to help you! You are very seriously injured." He lowered his voice in a calmer tone, "I know that you're confused, but-"

"Where am I?" Kalika asked icily.

"You're on Infinity, a human space vessel," the human's voice shook.

"Where are we?" she demanded.

"We're in orbit above your home planet, Sanghelios."

Kalika stared at him with those intense snake-like eyes, "...Sanghelios?" She looked like she was out of breath. She looked around the room subconsciously, blinking and flicking her eyes across the floor as her brain churned, "Sanghelios... how long was I asleep?"

"Seven months."

Her entire body froze and she stared at him as if he had just put a bullet in her chest. "S...seven months?"

"I know, I know... if you get on the bed, I'll explain everything."

"Where is Thel?"

"I'll tell you if you'd just-"

"How did I get here?"

"Please, just calm down and-"

Kalika growled in a thunderous way and stormed off toward the glass doors. These damn humans could never answer you directly. The doors parted with an alien hiss before her, and she walked down a white hallway on a metal grated floor.

THWIP!

She flinched. A numbing feeling flowered across her neck. Her vision blurred and it felt as though air had been knocked out of her lungs. She stumbled forth through a hazed spectrum of bright lights and stared at a shadow that had appeared further down the corridor. It was tall and wore a gold armor—those eyes...

"Thel..." She moaned and fell forward into blackness.

* * *

><p>When she woke again, she was on the bed with her upper body lifted at a 45 degree angle. She stared at the shadows on the ceiling. She wearily turned her head and stared at the window that she didn't really notice before... and her breath had been taken away.<p>

The bold red of Sanghelios glowed out of the darkness of space. Sunlight glistened on its horizon from one of its suns, and she could see one of its handsome moons. Qihost was the smallest moon and shone a silver blue color upon the surface of Sanghelios. She remembered its night skies well. She continued to stare and watch the rising sun embrace Sanghelios in its golden rays.

"Kalika," A surprised voice said.

She turned her head as fast as her aching neck would let her. Her eyes softened when she saw him. Thel 'Vadam smiled at her and drew his strange plastic chair closer to her bed. "The humans said it would be best if I were the first you saw when you woke up."

Kalika tried to lift her hands to touch him, but her wrists and ankles were strapped down to the bed. This terrified her. Not again! She started to breathe a little heavier and that annoying beeping sound beeped faster.

"Kalika, calm down," Thel said and wrapped his fingers around her own. "You are safe."

"Why are we on a human vessel? Since when are we allies with the humans?" She asked hurriedly.

"I will start from the beginning... you have missed much," His

fingers tightened around hers, "...and I have missed you."

This calmed her enough that the beeping slowed and her lungs expanded in a more gradual fashion. She remained silent and waited patiently for him to begin his story.

He took her hand in both of his and took a deep breath before speaking, "After you fell into the depths of the Activation Room on the halo, I could not bring myself to believe that you were dead. Too many times, I have seen you crawl out of Death's grasp. But just the thought..." He looked down at their hands. "I was so angry, Kalika... I attacked Tartarus blindly. I was lucky that his shields were down when I did. Tartarus fell and the activation sequence was stopped. This set all of the Halos on a standby status, or so the oracle said. He also explained that all of the Halos could be activated by a machine called the Ark. The humans and I worked together to reach it, where we knew Truth would be headed...The Prophet of Truth was invading earth by the time we arrived, searching in a land called Africa for the Ark. What he found was merely a portal. The Demon and I encountered the portal too late and Truth escaped. At that moment, a Covenant ship flew overhead and crashed nearby. It was infested with Flood, and on it was a message from Cortana, the Demon's AI, and..." He looked away from their hands and up at her, "...and you." He looked so sad. The ridges of his eyes furrowed together with heavy thought and his grasp on her fingers tightened. She calmly stared at him as he turned his gaze to the floor, "You were... there was so much blood, Kalika...I...I could not do anything... I was so helpless and I... I should have listened to you since the beginning... you were right all along... about everything... about the Covenant, the Great Journey, the Prophets, the-"

"Stop, Thel," Kalika said. He looked up at her, not at first, but his gaze slowly trailed up to her own. "If you had listened to me then, do you think you would have learned from your mistakes? Would you have grown to be who you are now?" His jaws parted, but he did not answer. "Bad things happen for a reason. The past is not happening now because the past does not exist. You can only do what you can do now. Learn from the past, Thel, but do not dwell on it."

A dim smile lit up the old warrior's face, "You advise me well, my Lady."

She nodded, "Continue your story."

Thel looked down at their hands again, "We brought you and Cortana onto Rtas' ship, the Shadow of Intent. Cortana relayed a message concerning the killing of the Flood at the Ark to rid of them once and for all. So we led the Flood to the Ark through the portal with the intent of killing Truth and stopping the halos. When we got to the Ark, we fought our way through Covenant and Flood alike. The Master Chief and I very briefly allied with the Gravemind... the leader of the parasites, and reached Truth just in time. He had killed a Miranda Keyes, a UNSC officer, and was just about to activate the rings when we arrived."

Kalika blinked, finding the name familiar.

"I killed him with my own sword through his back and chest. The Gravemind betrayed us as we tried to escape the Ark. So we sought out a control room where the Oracle said that we could cause an

unfinished Halo to self destruct and destroy the Flood once and for all. After setting the self-destruct sequence, the Spartan and I escaped on a ship called Forward Unto Dawn... however, the portal I opened to Earth closed too soon and cut our ship in half. The Spartan was lost, and I crashed into an ocean on Earth. The humans retrieved me and brought me ashore. I attended a human ceremony briefly to honor their dead... they counted the Spartan among them. I had failed to return him home... it was the least I could do."

"I hurriedly joined Rtas on the Shadow of Intent to check on you... hoping that you were better. However, the ship had little medical aid, and all we could do was keep you alive in a coma. Rtas told me it was against Sangheili culture...to accept your death. I knew that... and I knew you would not forgive me if I did save you... but..." The weary warrior exhaled and closed his eyes, "...I ignored his words and we traveled home to Sanghelios. I had forgotten how beautiful the stone and fields of Vadam keep were. I still have not gotten the chance to meet the children. They were transferred to another location for their own safety."

Kalika frowned at this, "Why?"

Thel did not look away from their fingers, "I had attended many meetings before I went to the keep. I met with the Kaidons and stressed to them that Sanghelios was drained from the war, and without the Prophets, we would need aid. I advised that we befriend the humans and maintain our independence. Not many Sangheili seemed to like this idea, but I remained insistent. Shortly after, a civil war broke out. We were outnumbered. So, I met with an Admiral Hood... a leader of the humans, and agreed to cooperate on friendly terms."

"There were those who supported me, however there were far more against me. Then, there were murders and killings, organized by a religious group... Neru Pe 'Odosima... the Servants of the Abiding Truth... they were angered by some of the Kaidon's attempts to destroy Forerunner artifacts."

"Those crazy bastards..." Kalika growled.

"Sanghelios was wrought with a civil war... the politics grew more and more violent. I could do nothing, Kalika. Those against me grew tired of my cries for a peace treaty, and in overwhelming numbers, attacked Vadam keep. Admiral Hood provided reinforcements and invited me on board his ship, Infinity. I brought you with me, begging of them to heal you." He smiled up at her, "And they did."

She gave him a very stoic gaze, "You should have let me die," and stared back up at the ceiling.

His smile faded. They sat in a very quiet silence, listening to the soft beeps of the machines. Kalika closed her eyes and inhaled with a wheeze. Thel slowly released his fingers from her own. But she stretched her fingers as far as she could, "Wait..." She looked at him with a fore-longing look. "I am grateful... thank you for finding me."

His smile returned, but more faintly this time, and slipped his fingers back through her own again. "And thank you for staying with me even when I would not listen."

Kalika observed him and her eyes widened over his peculiar armor, "Your armor is different."

Instead of its original dull silver color, it was now a handsome dark gold. The designs were more intricate and detailed with lines that elegantly curved along the helmet and slanted triangles that emphasized the sweep of his head and neck. The chest piece covered his abdomen but revealed his black suit on his sides for better movement.

"Ah, yes..." He said, looking down at himself, "the day after you had fallen, I officially pulled away from the Covenant and gave up the name 'Vadamee' for 'Vadam. I decided that it was time for change... to do what I felt was right. And it was when I reached that conclusion that the armor changed. I suppose you were right about the AI embedded in it."

"A Priestess knows her lore..." Kalika smiled. "I am happy for you."

Again, they sat in silence. The heart monitor beeped in time with both of Kalika's slow heart beats, and she breathed raggedly. Then she asked, "How long will I be here?"

"Several months more at the most," he said.

Kalika's throat tightened with a guttural growl, "Stuck here to this bed?"

"I am afraid so, love." Thel rumbled softly. "Just until you are healed."

"What more needs healing?"

"Your spine and hips still need to readjust, and your bones in your hands and toes are too brittle to risk walking around. There is something wrong with your heart and lungs too, so the doctors tell me... just a few months."

Kalika's chest grew warm and shuddered with impatience. "I do not like humans..."

Thel shook his head, "It is ignorance to be angry at them for the war-"

"I do not care for any damn war." Kalika snarled with a roll of her eyes and a curl of her lip. Thel cocked his head to the side in confusion. She looked down at her wrists and gave the white straps a tug. "I disapprove of these restraints..."

Thel chuckled and relaxed in his chair, "Perhaps if you did not terrorize their doctors, they would not have to restrain you."

"I did not touch their idiot doctor..." she mumbled.

Thel leaned forward, "Get better so that you can return home and see to our children."

Kalika's tense expression hardened, "I do not want to see them."

"Of course you do," Thel said gently.

Kalika stared at the ceiling and shook her head, "You know very well that I do not."

The Arbiter drew up his head and looked down at her with a troubled gaze. "You are not well. I will let you rest." He took his hand away and stood as Kalika turned her head to look at him. He made his way toward the glass door.

"...Thel?"

He stopped and looked back at her with a raised and inquiring eye-ridge.

"Thank you."

"What for, my Lady?"

"Visiting me..." She looked away from him in an almost shameful manner.

He smiled, "Sleep, Kalika," and disappeared behind the translucent glass.

15. Log 14

CONSORT

of the

HERETIC

Created by Cyber and Zmori

Edited by ShoopWoop17

/Access Data Logs

Year 2553, July 5th

Rolam Keep, Sanghelios

3:55 Hours

Log 14

The red mountains of the Rolam state were covered in shadow. The stars were glistening against the black of the night sky, far more brightly than any sky on earth. Suban, Sanghelios' enormous silver moon, sank its bulbous self behind the crests of Rolam's monstrous peaks. Its white light was shrouded behind a veil of clouds.

Rolam keep was built into the depths of a mountain called Talark. Its front archway and halls were the only visible structures at the bottom of the mountain. The walls were made of gray stone. Thin green vines curled up the textured pillars and white blossoms bloomed in the rays of moonlight.

Pat, pat, pat, pat, pat, patâ€¦|

Tiny footsteps pattered across the stone floor and down the hallway. A young Sangheili girl wearing her brown night dress sprinted hurriedly past the shadows of the tall pillars. Her skin was a soft gold and she had large hazel eyes. Her mandibles hadn't developed just yet. She still had webs in between her upper and lower mandibles. Her teeth were just coming in and were little nubs in her jaws. Her small toes touched down quickly as she turned the corner and ducked under a blanket into the older girls' room. She scuttled up to one of the cots on the floor and knelt down. She butted her muzzle against the body under the heavy blanket, "Netu! Netu!" The young one whispered.

"Mmmmmmm..."

"Netu! Wake up!" The child patted her tiny hands on the blanket.

"What is it, Valina?" The body stirred.

The little one called Valina widened her eyes and whined in an innocent voice, "You swaid that we cwould swee tha suns cwome up..."

"Oh, alright. Let me get dressed." Netu scratched at her mandible.

"Yeeeeeee-!" Valina began to squeal.

"Shhh! You have to be quiet, or the Lady will hear you!" Netu hissed.

"Oh." Valina giggled and clasped her little hands over her mouth.

Netu was a beautiful adolescent female. She wasn't as tall as her other sisters nor as intimidating, but her eyes were a soft and friendly green and she had a very warm smile. Her skin was a dark bronze color and she had one single bright freckle next to her left eye.

"But tha Wady is nwot tha weal Wady..." Valina sighed, wringing her little hands together.

Netu sat up and pushed the brown blanket away from her bare legs. She lifted a roll of clothes from the head of her cot and dressed herself in a brown nightgown similar to Valina's. "No, but the real one will be back before you know it." Netu said encouragingly. She offered her hand to her little sister. "Come on. We have a lot of climbing to do."

Valina's eyes widened and she stomped on the ground rapidly with excitement. She took Netu's hand and was led out of the dark room. "Now, we have to be very quiet, okay? We do not want to be caught."

"Dwoo nwot worry. I am tha best quieter in tha world!" Valina said loudly enough to make her voice echo down the hallway.

"Shhh..." Netu hushed gently, looking around for any guards. Security wasn't as tight in Rolam keep like it was at home. This bewildered Netu. With as much violence and war going on beyond Rolam's borders, it seemed extremely simple-minded for there to be so little look out. Did the Kaidon honestly think that they were safe in the mountains? That the bloodshed would not spread to his lands?

The Arbiter seemed to think so. Netu knew that some of her siblings did not agree upon his treaty with the humans. He was the Arbiter to everyone except to herself. He would always be Uncle Thel to her, no matter how old she became. Despite how little contact she had with him, she remembered how pleasant he was to be around...

...very much unlike her mother. Lady 'Vadam was a very confusing person. It was as though if anyone so much as existed in her presence, they'd have the wrath of a demon unleashed upon them. If anyone so much as looked at her wrong, they could lose a limb. Literally. Netu recalled a time that a male, a merchant's son trying to court her older sister, gave the Lady a bewildered look when she threatened to feed his fingers through the doarmir's food processor. Her sisters called him "Nubs" for the longest time.

"Come on, Netu!" Valina trotted up to a tall staircase that twisted and disappeared into the mountain. Torches were encased in elegant metal holders on pillars and on the walls of the staircase. Bright yellow flames danced on the ends of the thick wood, creating a flickering glow in the darkness. Netu allowed Valina to walk her up the stairs. They wound up and up and up until they climbed onto the floor of one of Rolam Keep's highest watch towers.

A warm wind brushed against Netu's face, like a mother's reassuring hand on her child's cheek. Looking out from the tower, Netu could see all different kinds of mountains. There were mountains so big in the distance that they hid the rest of Sanghelios' lands away. There were smaller mountains that could barely lift their peaks over the silver haze of morning mist below them. The skies were alight with bright pinks and oranges, and around the thick layer of clouds was a golden lining, telling of the coming of the suns.

"Netu, cwould you lift me up, pwease?" Valina tugged at Netu's gown and pointed at the stone wall blocking her view.

"Of course." Netu said with a smile and reached down to pick up her baby sister.

Valina's eyes widened and glistened. She exhaled with amazement, "Oh, wow..."

Netu couldn't count the number of times that she had brought Valina up here, but she never tired of her reaction.

"Netu?"

"Hm?"

"I wish tha Wady cwould see this."

"The Lady is asleep. It would be rude to wake her up."

"No, nwot her. Tha weal Wady."

Netu looked at Valina. It had been nearly nine months since their mother had left. Valina was less than two years old. Sangheili developed and grew quickly during this time period, but it still amazed Netu how much Valina understood. Did Valina even remember how awful Kalika was to her? Kalika once had her walk into a field of Helioskrills as a punishment for not finishing her meal. She told her, "If you will not eat, then I know someone who will." Valina was just two. It was her birthday that day. She was lucky to be alive. How she escaped with only a tiny scar on her heel, not one person knew.

Still, Valina loved Kalika more than anyone. Valina adored her mother. No matter how awful or cruel Kalika was to her, Valina still offered her her love. Every time that Kalika entered the room, Valina's eyes would glitter and she'd wobble over to her, spreading her arms for a hug. Everytime, Kalika would push her away. Valina still smiled and still reached for a hug every chance she got.

"Netu, wook!" Valina pointed toward the sky.

Netu followed Valina's finger and looked upon the first glimpse of one of Sanghelios' suns. It shone rays of sunlight across the great red peaks of the mountains. It turned the silver mists into a bright yellow and the clouds into orange and gold. Pools of light flooded the watch tower as the sun continued to rise from the apex of one of the larger mountains.

"It is bootifool." Valina sighed.

Netu smiled, "Y-"

"What do you think you are doing up here?" A stern voice asked.

Netu and Valina both cringed. Netu slowly turned, "Good morning, Nara."

"That is Lady Nara to you." A Sangheili woman said to them as she stepped up onto the floor.

"But you are nwot tha weal-"

"My apologies, my Lady." Netu bowed her head.

"Neither of you are supposed to be awake yet. This is the third time that I have caught you up here. I will not tolerate a fourth. Netu, you should know better. You are nearly an adult. I expect you to act like it." Nara said sternly. Nara was an average-height female with very dark black skin and flashing green eyes. Today, she wore a solid red robe that hung on her shoulders, draped across her knees and cut down to her heels in the back like most robes, and flowed across her arms and wrists. She wasn't as attractive, with her stubbly mandibles and long, wrinkled muzzle. Her hide was thick with scales on her shoulders and elbows. Her descendants were from the deserts of Sanghelios, and were adapted for such environments. The desert breeds are not the most attractive among the Sangheili, however they are a strong people.

Nara began to pace along the floor. "Your mother has never taught you the proper, respectful ways of the Sangheili. I understand that. She is to blame for your incompetence. She has only taught you violence and defiance. It is not the Sangheili way."

"Pardon me, Lady Nara, but is that not what our people are doing now?"

"What in Helios' name are you talking about, Netu? And get that child away from the wall! You are making me nervous."

Netu set Valina down on the floor. "You say that violence and defiance are not the Sangheili way... but just beyond Rolam's borders, a violent war is going on between Sangheili who are defying their leaders."

"That has NOTHING to do with you!" Nara growled.

Netu decided to keep her mandibles clamped. Valina clutched Netu's hand tightly as Nara began to pace faster.

"Your mother is mad. Crazy. Uncontrollable! How she ever became the Lady is beyond my comprehension! Now that I have assumed control of the keep, I have provided the proper care and set down respectable rules. I am much more forgiving than that whore."

"Do nwot twok about tha Wady that way!" Valina yelled. Netu didn't know if Valina understood that last word, but she could hope that she wouldn't repeat it.

"And yet, all that you children can do is spit in my face. It is madness. I will do what I can to provide for you all before Lady 'Vadam returns to take her place back. Times are harsh. As soon as this civil war is over, we shall return your family to 'Vadam keep. For now, I suggest that you do what I say and be thankful for it."

"Yes, my Lady." Netu said and bowed her head. Valina only stared angrily at Nara.

"Come, then." Nara said and motioned her head toward the stairs.

Netu nodded and took Valina's hand. Valina looked behind herself as they made their way toward the stairs. She suddenly gasped and pointed her finger, "Netu, wook! The next sun!"

"No more suns today, Valina." Netu said.

"No, no, wook! Weally fast! Wook!"

"Move forward, child." Nara snarled.

"Guys, wook!"

Netu sighed with impatience and looked to see what was so important to see. Indeed, there was a yellow light in the distance...wait... Netu stopped walking and stared at the yellow light. It was in the wrong place. It wasn't bright like a sun. In fact, it was in the valley ahead of them.

"What are you two looking at?!" Nara growled and looked where Netu's gaze was facing. Nara's muzzle lost its wrinkles as her eyes widened. "What is...?"

A shadow appeared for a brief moment in the air. "My Lady!" Netu screamed and tackled Nara to the ground. A millisecond later, a loud "thunk" sounded behind them. Valina stared at a long black arrow stuck in the crack of the stones that made the pillars of the watch tower. The feathers of the arrow were black and grey, and its shaft was painted ebony as well.

"Get downstairs, both of you! Now!" Nara yelled. She leaped up onto her feet and scooped Valina up into her arms. Netu followed right after her and together they ran down the stairs. When they reached the bottom, Nara put Valina down and pulled Netu close to her.

"Warn the Kaidon. Tell him that the keep is soon to be under attack, if it is not already. I will ready the sentinels. Keep Valina with you. Protect her." Nara reached under the skirt of her robe and pulled out a knife. The blade glistened gold in the morning light. Its bronze hilt had a beautiful design of a Helioskrill on one side and on the other side, a warrior. She shoved it into Netu's hands. "Warn the Kaidon before you warn anyone else. The Kaidon will know what to do. With speed. Go. Now!"

Valina's eyes were widened with fear. Netu picked her up, turned, and ran. Adrenaline was pumping through her veins already at this point. She ran past the elegant banners marking the dining room and the statues of previous Arbiters carved into the walls.

"What about Thesa and Crea and-" Valina squeaked.

"We have to warn the Kaidon first!" Netu cried.

"But-!" Valina pointed at their brothers' room, an open doorway also marked with a blanket covering the door.

"Be quiet, Valina!" Netu shouted as she ran up a grand flight of stairs. She turned down several halls before coming to a large and grand door. She set Valina down, "Stay here. Do not go anywhere!"

"But Netu-!"

"Stay!"

Netu banged her fists on the Kaidon's doors and shoved them open. "Lord Ilikas! The keep is under attack!"

"What?" A deep voice rumbled from a bed in the shadows of the room. A loud boom sounded outside, and the walls of the keep groaned. A cloud of dirt burst from the ceiling and showered all over the floor.

"The war is here! The keep is under attack!"

of the

HERETIC

Created by Cyber and Zmori

Edited by ShoopWoop17

/Access Data Logs

Year 2553, July 6th

Infinity, Orbiting Sanghelios

9:48 Hours

Log 15

"That's it, Kalika. You're doing great."

"Shut it, human." The tall she-warrior snarled. Her legs were shaky, but she strode with a long gait and high chins.

"Incredibleâ€|" The doctor breathed, running his fingers over a blinking tablet. "...Incredibleâ€|"

"What is it, doctor?" Thel asked with a raised eye ridge.

"Her recovery!" The man dressed in a white coat looked at Kalika with wide eyes and a crooked smile. She paced across a white concrete floor with a very agitated expression on her face. She was in a wide room that separated their room with glass. White circular sensors were attached all over her body. It took Thel six hours to convince her to let the humans test her. She was not at all pleased when they brought needles and these...sensors to her.

"What do you mean?" Thel asked, looking at the doctor's tablet over the human's shoulder. On it, he could see words and numbers that he couldn't make out on the right side of the screen. He had begun to learn human symbols about a week after he boarded the ship, but had yet to begin to read large words. On the left side of the screen was a moving image of Kalika walking in place. It was like her skin had become completely see-through. He could see her skeleton and inner organs, all working in tandem together. He had never seen these organs in motion before in a living being. He had seen thousands of these organs, still and lifeless within the corpses that layered the hills of victorious battlefields of the Covenant, but never anything like this in such detail.

"The remodeling process commenced shortly, and quite rapidly, after she woke up this morning. Her healing processes across all levels are still rising in activity; vasoconstriction, coagulation, and her vessels are spitting out any clots in her system like-

"What does that mean?"

The doctor sighed softly, "Her bones remade themselves. She practically grew a new skeleton overnight. Her system is rebuilding itself at incredible rates...it's...a miracle...incredible. There is

so much that we do not understand about Sangheili, but...I've never seen a recovery like this from your kind."

Thel looked at Kalika who was still tramping around in an impatient fashion and smiled. "Is it safe for her to walk now?"

"We thought it would be months, Arbiter...but from what it seems, she is ready." The doctor nodded. "She's still fragile. I wouldn't let her do any heavy exercises or anything too tiring. Let her get rest. Other than that, she's fine." The doctor looked up from his tablet and watched Kalika for a little while longer.

"Thank you, Dr. David."

The doctor turned his dark brown eyes to the giant Sangheili with a warm smile, "You are very welcome, Arbiter."

With a low rumble, the Arbiter stood and towered over the human. He exited the small control room into the hallway as the doctor spoke into a microphone attached to his black earpiece, "Mrs. Vadam, you are free to leave now. My assistant will be around shortly to help you remove the sensors. Thank you for your time."

"About time." Kalika growled with a curl of her lip and a flare of her mandibles. She made her way toward a sliding door on the right side of the room. The Arbiter was already waiting for her in the hallway. The moment Kalika stepped out onto the concrete floor, she ripped the sensors off of her head.

The Arbiter grabbed her wrist, "The assistant is supposed to help you with that."

"To hell with the assistant." Kalika shook his grip off and tore the circular sensors away from the skin over her pectoral muscles, and then the ones under her white suit. The suit was so disgustingly alien to her. It hugged the base of her neck, covered her shoulders, and revealed the entirety of her belly. It parted in the middle of her chest and in the middle of her back as well. It hugged her bum a little too tightly for comfort, and covered her legs except for her four toes. It was white, just like everything else in the blasted building. It had a strange scale-like texture. Supposedly, it was designed to monitor body heat and acted as a lead shield against the X-rays shot at her body. She hated it. It itched in all of the wrong places.

She jerked her hands under the suit and removed the sensors herself. She threw all twenty four of them onto the floor. The Arbiter watched her dumbfoundedly as she started to strip the suit off as well.

"Uh...erm...Kalikaâ€¦what are you-?"

"Clamp it, Thel."

Kalika tossed the bloody thing onto the floor as well and stormed off down the hall.

"Kalika, you need to slow down! You are not completely recovered yet!" Thel had to trot to catch up to her.

"I will not be bossed around by some damned doctor!" She hissed as she turned down the hallway toward her ward.

"He is only trying to help. Slow down, Kalika."

"To hell with them all. To the doctor, his ugly assistant, to the administration, the machines, and the--"

The Arbiter grabbed her wrist and pulled her back. She nearly tripped trying to get away as he wrapped his arms around her. "Slow down." He said gently. She remained stiff and still. She said nothing for a while and stared ahead icily.

"Let me go."

"Why would I want to do that?" He asked, his deep voice rumbling and accompanied by a low Sangheili purr.

She snarled and broke his grasp with a swift motion of her arms and stormed forward again. Thel watched her go. There was something attractive in the way that she sauntered when she was angry. Her hips still swayed, although in a more rapid manner, but her head was always held upward in a sort of dignified manner; as though no matter what she did wrong or how ridiculous the thing that she was upset about, she was always justified in her reason. It was infuriating sometimes, but her stubbornness was something to be appreciative of.

Well...for the most part.

"You need to be dressed appropriately in an hour, Kalika." Thel called after her just before she disappeared behind the foggy glass doors. He followed after her and opened the door cautiously.

"What for?" She inquired in a very agitated manner.

"We are going to take you to a special doctor."

She flipped the blankets off of her bed and sat on the cot. She threw the sheet over her entire body and curled up into a ball. "No more doctors."

The Arbiter lumbered slowly toward her bedside. "He is a scientist more than a doctor. This scientist is only analyzing your recovery. He researches the biology of the Sangheili."

"I am not a test subject." The mound grumbled from under the blanket.

The Arbiter sat down on the cot, making the framework creak under his massive weight. "You will not be tested. Only analyzed."

"No analyzing. Only sleep."

Thel lifted his arm and draped it over her body. He could feel the curves of her back under his forearm and the top of her rump against his palm. "The great and merciless warrior, Kalika 'Vadam, the consort of the Arbiter, prefers sleep over service? I have never heard of such a thing."

"You are hearing it now." She then mocked breathing noisily as though she were asleep.

Thel closed both layers of his eyelids as he sighed, "What am I going to do with you?"

"You are going to let me sleep."

Thel curled his lip and let loose a thunderous growl, "Enough of this, Kalika. Get dressed." He stood and tore the sheet off of her bare body. She opened her eyes and glared at him. He set the blanket on the end of the bed. When she reached out to snatch it, he pulled it back and bore his fangs at her, "Up. Now. That is an order."

She looked away from him and made a gruff noise in her chest. Thel growled again, louder this time, and stepped noisily to the side of the bed. He grabbed her shoulders and pulled her forward. She gasped and wrapped her arms around his. He sat her up and said, "If you are going to act like a child, then I will treat you like one."

She stared at him in confusion; at this change of mood from her husband. He stepped back toward a set of counters in the corner of the room, and from their drawers, he pulled out a black suit. He thrust it toward her.

She caught it in her hands and still looked at him with parted jaws and narrowed eyes. He stood before her, waiting. When she did nothing, he took it from her hands and grabbed her heel. He slipped her foot through the leggings of the suit, then the other, and pulled it over her body for her. She began to do the rest herself.

"Leave me. I can do it myself." She grumbled. He translated this as, You win. He snorted and took a few steps back, watching her slide her hands through the holes. When she looked down, she frowned. The suit was an exact replica of her original battle suit. The iridescent stripe covered most of her back and was thin across her abdomen. She looked up again in confusion.

Thel nodded, "When we found you, we found your armor as well. I am afraid that your suit was not salvageable, but the humans did their best to replicate it from the pieces we could give them. Your armor was repaired and awaits you in the armory. We can visit there after you visit the scientist, and only if you visit the scientist."

Kalika wrinkled her muzzle at him. Nothing would give her more comfort than to have her armor back. He knew that. She decided to humor him. "As you wish, Arbiter." She said and stood. "Let us see this scientist then."

* * *

><p>"You said nothing of meddling amongst the infantry." Kalika growled.<p>

"It has been weeks since either of us have had a proper meal." Thel noted. The couple strode into the cafeteria of the ship. It was massive. The ceiling towered a good forty to fifty feet tall and was supported by steel beams that zig-zagged across the room. The floor was filled with long gray tables. Each table seated about thirty

humans. Large white lights brightly lit the room from their long wires on the ceiling.

At first, Kalika's stomach felt queasy. Seeing so many humans in one place was not a good thing. Her instincts said, "Danger." Once she worked herself through it, her eyes stopped darting around and focused, and her body relaxed into a statue-like stance. That's when she started to get strange looks. The humans seemed to tolerate the Arbiter's presence, but many eyes fell on her. The loud ambiance of the cafeteria grew louder. Thel walked, and Kalika followed. "You would have us eat human food?" She asked, catching glimpses of the humans' trays of food and wrinkling her muzzle in disgust. "It is all...cooked."

Thel nodded as he made his way toward the end of the room where a line seemed to be forming, "Yes. We need to be appreciative of their hospitality and eat what we are given."

"What kind of system is this?" Kalika asked as they came to a stop behind a line. "Can we not have food taken to us in our rooms?"

"We could."

"Then why do we not?"

"We were asked to meet here. We might as well catch a meal."

Kalika's frown was about as deep as any Sangheili could muster without strain. "Here? Amongst the low-lives?"

A human standing in front of the Arbiter turned to look at them both. Kalika caught his eye and narrowed her own. He stared for a few brief moments longer, and then turned around. He had much darker skin than the human she had encountered in the snow of the Delta Halo. She hadn't realized how diverse human skin color could be. Perhaps she would run into some red or green ones?

As she looked around the cafeteria, she observed the humans. Most were deeply involved in conversation, while others stared blankly at their trays and ate absentmindedly. They all looked the same to her. She was not sure she would ever be able to tell one apart from another by sight. Their smell was very strong, but not necessarily unpleasant. Human scent always had a salty tinge to it. With so many in one place, the smell was a little overwhelming. The food did not smell appealing at all. She caught many eyes staring at her. The humans closest to her didn't seem to think that she could hear them. When she honed her senses on their conversations, she heard many things.

"Check out the split-lips."

"Is that a girl?"

"Nah, girl Elites have hair and big boobs. Trust me, I've read online forums."*****

"Then that's an alien man with a fine ass."

"Gross, dude."

Kalika found the owners to the voices two tables forward to her left. There were three men seated on the very edge of their table. All three took turns taking a look at her. She stared them down. They were all light-skinned, although two had straw-colored hair, and the third had dark hair.

"Is he looking at us?"

"I think so."

"Should we invite them over?"

"Fuck, no!"

"Why not?"

"See that big one? That's the Arbiter."

"The what?"

"He's the leader of the Elites. Or he was until his people kinda launched a civil war on him."

"What's he doing here?"

"Dunno."

"Who's the elite next to him?"

"I'm not a fucking search engine, Thomas."

Kalika turned to Thel, "Why do they call us Elites?"

The Arbiter turned to her, "It is a name the humans gave us before they knew the true name of our race. I have heard that humans prefer 'Elite' for its shortness."

Kalika said nothing and looked toward the humans again.

"NEXT!"

Kalika turned her head and looked upon perhaps the most pitiful creature she had ever laid eyes upon. Behind a glass window was a squat old woman. Her face looked like it had been smashed between two hammers and stayed like that. It was wrinkled and her neck sagged down with fat. Her arms jiggled when she moved them so much of an inch. She had enormous breasts that rested on her bulging belly.

"I SAID, 'NEXT'!" She grouched and motioned toward the man in front of the Arbiter. The dark man pointed toward food in square containers. The squat woman scooped up the multicolored food in a long ladle and slapped it onto a grey tray.

Then the woman looked at the Arbiter. Kalika hadn't thought it possible, but the woman's wrinkles darkened around her mouth in a scowl more fierce than the last. "Oh. Split-lips. Dr. Facilier said you would come here. What do you need?"

"A selection from your raw meats would do just fine, thank you." The Arbiter bowed his head respectfully.

The woman disappeared into the back of the kitchen, and returned with two trays in each arm. There were three slabs of bright red meat on each one. It had a strange tinge to its scent. Thel cocked his head to one side, "Is there any chance that there is any more to help ourselves to?"

The woman's eyes squinted, "I ain't makin another trip back there. It's enough that I have to stand 'ere all day."

Kalika bore her fangs at the woman and a shuddering growl rattled in her throat. She didn't have a weapon to flash before her, so instead she balled up both fists at her sides.

The human rolled her eyes, "Fine, ya crazy bitch." She waddled her way into the back, and returned with trays piled with the red meat. "Here. Now get goin'."

"Thank you." The Arbiter bowed his head as he took the trays. Kalika snorted at her.

The couple moved away from the line and made their way through the aisle before them. Thel wasn't that tall for a Sangheili, but he still towered above the humans more so than she did. The loud clangs from his boots brought even more attention to him from the humans sitting at their tables.

"Where are we supposed to meet this Dr...Faceâ€¦" Kalika's tongue tripped around at the name.

"I am not sure."

"...What?"

Thel shrugged, "He told me to meet him in the cafeteria. I am certain that that is the name of this room."

Kalika groaned softly. "Why do I listen to you?"

"Hey, Arbiter!" A voice called. Kalika recognized the voice two tables back from where she was. When she looked, she saw the three humans from before sitting alone at their end of the table, one of them beckoning toward them. "Over here!"

Thel tilted his head for a moment before slowly proceeding toward the man. Kalika didn't like this. Hesitantly, she followed him. "Yes?" Thel stood at the end of the table and looked upon the human. She could tell that he was trying his best not to seem so intimidating to them. He was hunching his back down lower to make himself seem smaller, and he chose his words hesitantly. He was speaking English, which seemed to be coming more natural for him. Her translator helped her to make out his words. She refused to learn any word of the human's language.

"Why don't you sit with us?"

"That is very kind of you, but I am afraid that I am waiting for a Dr. Facilier."

"Oh, that's fine. I just wanted to ask you a few questions, if you could spare a few minutes." The human smiled kindly to him. This human had very light features, with a very animated brow, wavy golden hair brushed to the side, and bright green eyes that shimmered with curiosity.

Thel looked doubtfully at the other two men, who refused to look at him and picked at their food with their strange utensils.

"We are here for the scientist, Thel. Do not waste our time." Kalika grumbled.

"Hey, dude, we don't have our translators. Care to speak English?"

"She does not know the language, I am afraid." Thel said. He approached the friendly man and sat down next to him. The seats groaned beneath his weight and the table creaked downward on their end. Kalika gave Thel an uncertain look. He nodded toward the seat across from him, which was next to one of the other humans. Kalika clamped her jaws tightly before slowly and silently making her way to the seat. "However, she can understand you."

All three humans perked at this.

"Wait, that's a girl?"

"Elite girls are bald?"

"Elite girls don't have boobs?"

Kalika wrinkled her muzzle and her eye ridges were pulled back in a very agitated expression. "Why are we sitting with these idiots?"

"What'd she say?"

"She said it is a pleasure meeting you." Thel said with a smile tugging at his cheeks.

"Oh, alright, cool. So you'll translate for us?"

Thel nodded. "What shall we call you?"

The man beamed happily, "The name's Schneider. The gloomy bloke next to your girl is Mabry, and next to me here is Thomas."

The Arbiter bowed his head in respect. "A pleasure. I am Thel, and this is my wife, Kalika." He motioned his hand toward her. She said nothing in return and stared down at her meat.

All three of the humans continued to stare at her curiously. "So did she get her boobs cut off as some sort of culture...rite?" The man next to Schneider asked. Thomas, he was called. He had slick black hair that fanned back and a chin that could pry open a can. His eyes looked like they had been squashed and stretched and were a dark brown color that gave him a mysterious look.

Kalika turned her head quickly toward him and bore the tips of her

teeth, "What?"

Thel stifled a laugh, "No, our females are not born with breasts."

"But the online forums saidâ€¦"

Kalika growled softly and clenched her fist on the table.

"I would not believe everything that your... 'online forums' say." Thel said softly as he lifted up his tray. He spread his mandibles and put the tray to the edge of his bottom lip. He kicked his head back and closed his jaws around several pieces of meat, then put the tray down and allowed the meat to slide down his throat. He looked back down and wiped his bottom lip with two index fingers. The humans stared at him strangely.

Kalika performed this exact same routine as the humans watched her with open jaws.

"How come you don't have boobs?"

Kalika slammed her tray down, "What is with these humans and their obsession with breasts?"

"What'd she say?"

"She said that the meat is terrible."

"Oh. Yeah, the food isn't the greatest here. So, could you answer the question?"

Thel exhaled softly, "Sangheili infants do not feed upon milk. They feed off of food regurgitated from their mother."

"Fascinating!" A voice said behind Thel. The Arbiter turned his head and looked upon a man with a white uniform. "Hello, Arbiter. I am Dr. Facilier." The human held out his hand.

Thel turned and shook it. He nodded, "Pleasure meeting you, doctor."

Kalika stared icily at the human as he held out his hand toward her. "Hello, Lady 'Vadam."

She said nothing and did nothing. This doctor had shiny black hair across the top of his head and a tuft of it poked out on his angular chin. Intelligence swam in the warmth of his cocoa-brown eyes. He had a tall and lanky body that reminded her of a pole at her keep that she had one day punched in half. He had a curious, thin smile that was friendly and kind, but made her feel a little uncomfortable. There was another man next to him who disturbed her even more so. This man wore a long white coat, and was short. His hair was a fiery red color, and his eyes didn't seem quite right. His right eye quivered in place. His shoulders were hunched over and he held his hands behind his back.

The first scientist smiled and pulled his hand back, "Right then. I see that you have both finished your meals. Would you care to join me?"

"Aw, doc, but I didn't get to ask my questions!" Schneider whined.

The Arbiter bowed his head, "Perhaps we shall lunch together another time, then?" He stood with his tray, and Kalika gladly followed suit. She ambled around the table and stood at Thel's side, like a shadow that was so obviously there that it loomed unnoticed by objects of the real world. Thel leaned over and said quietly, "You must shake their hands, Kalika. It is a formal way of greeting."

Kalika gave Thel a quick glance. "Fine."

The man in the long white coat was staring at her in a strange way. She was not afraid of him. She put her hand out stiffly and awkwardly toward him. He stared at it curiously. His eyes suddenly widened and he grabbed her wrist.

"What-?" Kalika wrestled her arm away and her face twisted into one of confusion. The man pulled her suit back and began to press his fingers hard into her skin. Thel and Dr. Facilier blinked, dumbfounded as well. "Stop!" Kalika growled. The man continued to pull her suit back and lifted her arm, trying to look under it.

With her free hand, she punched the man dead in the face. He crumpled like a stack of papers to the floor. The cafeteria fell silent fast. All eyes turned to them.

"Kalika!" Thel snarled sternly.

"He was touching me!" Kalika retorted in disgust.

"I am sorry, this is Anderson, my assistant." Facilier said nervously, motioning toward the man on the floor. "He is...quite eccentric, although he is a very brilliant man."

"What was he doing?" Kalika growled.

When she looked back at Anderson, he was up on his feet, staring at her with wild green eyes. His right eye was still vibrating in place. This guy seriously creeped her out.

"There is a theory that female Sangheili have holes all throughout their bodies from which they orgasm." He said. He talked very fast for a human.

Kalika stared blankly at the man for the longest time. She punched him in the face once more and he fell to the floor. Her punches were only light enough to throw him to the ground and refrained herself from breaking any bones. Anderson, would however, have purple marks on his face.

"Kalika, stop that!" Thel growled.

"This man is ridiculous!" Kalika shouted and glared up at Thel.

"Please, accept my sincerest apologies!" Facilier said and glanced down at Anderson. "I don't know what's gotten into him. Please, follow me." He stepped over the scientist on the floor and made his

way out of the cafeteria.

Thel also stepped over him and followed the doctor's example. Before stepping over the man, Kalika took a quick glimpse around before she shoved her toes into Anderson's side. Then, with a high head, she followed the Arbiter out of the tall room with many eyes locked on her.

They followed the doctor down a long corridor. The lights were blinding her from their rectangular sockets along the curved ceiling. "I must apologize again. Dr. Anderson is very wrapped up in his work as a researcher of Sangheili. Nobody knows that much about them, much less females. I am sorry that he alarms you so."

Kalika snorted.

"No need, doctor." Thel said. "Where are we going now?"

"To our lab, where we can analyze your wife's recovery more closely."

"And research her bodily processes." A deep voice rasped.

Kalika flinched and glared at Anderson over her shoulder. He hadn't been there before. He was a creepy man. She turned and gave Thel a look that said, How could you let them do this to me?

Thel gave her a reassuring smile with the corners of his cheeks, an expression unnoticed by either doctor, and followed Dr. Facilier through a pair of sliding glass doors. They made their way through several doors of security before strolling into a large room. The lights were still very bright to her, and there were counters and strange glassware everywhere. In the center of the room was a large metal chair with pads that reclined back and a strange, curved metal contraption above it hanging from wires attached to the ceiling. There was a table next to it with many sharp, pointy tools. Kalika cringed her jaws, "What is that?"

"Oh, that's our dentistry department. We won't be working with you in here, today."

She shot the doctor a glowering look, "Today?"

Dr. Facilier chuckled as he walked to the opposite side of the room, "You are much too big to fit in that human chair. If it's the sharp tools that you are worried about, you have nothing to fear. They won't be going anywhere near you. Through these doors is where we will be taking you."

He pointed toward another set of glass doors. As the doors parted for the group, a much larger room unfolded before them. "This is our alien research department." The ceiling was enormous and there were shelves on the walls with many organized containers filled with multi-colored liquid and strange objects. There were towering, hollow glass pillars throughout the large room, filled with a murky fluid, and large alien creatures floating within them; creatures that she had never seen before. The room dipped down in the center with stairs cascading down onto the lowest floor. There were clean white tables and desks arrayed along the ground. Why did human doctors always have to work in white? It was extremely obnoxious. The lighting in the

room was so bright that she had to squint.

The doctor glided down the steps with a kind of still grace with the tip of his white coat barely grazing the tops of the stairs' concrete surface just before he stepped onto the lower floor. He motioned toward one of the white tables, "If you would, Lady 'Vadam, lie down on this table for me, please?"

Kalika gave Thel an uneasy look before turning her back to the table's edge, placing her palms on the table and sitting down upon it. Slowly, she lowered her back onto the pads of the table and stretched out her legs. The padding had an alien texture to her. It crackled beneath her like heavy paper, but felt like a very thick pillow with soft fluff underneath.

"Thank you very much for your cooperation. Now, I am going to hook these sensors up along your body, and-"

Kalika's pupils shrank and her teeth flashed like daggers, "You will hook nothing into my skin."

"No, no, of course not! It is a human phrase. I apologize. I simply mean that I will place these soft circles on your body. They will help me monitor what's going on within you." Dr. Facilier smiled with nothing but warmth and kindness on his strange, pink lips.

Dr. Anderson peered at her with squinting eyes through a large pair of goggles from the opposite side of the table. The lenses made his eyes appear three times their actual size and emphasized the quivering of his right eye. Now that she actually took the time to stare him down, she noticed that his eyes were different colors. His right eye was a steel blue color while the other was a stormy grey.

Her husband stood with the hunched scientist, gazing down at her coolly and tugged his cheeks upward when she met his eyes with her own.

"I must say, what a curious skin color for a Sangheili!" Dr. Facilier pipped as he reached toward the edge of the table and pressed it. From the left corner, a silver tray unfolded and rested beside him, and on it was a large selection of tools, some of which Kalika hoped to not be subject to. The scientist lifted a pair of white latex gloves and slid them over his hands, snapping them on his wrists. The human then lifted a box and opened it with a hiss. From it, he brought out what looked like circular, rubber pads. "Tell me, are your parents of the same color?" He inquired as he began to set the pads on her temples, at the top of her neck, at her collarbone, and so on and so forth.

"My mother has a dark red skin. I know nothing of my father."

"And your grandparents?"

"I know nothing of them either."

"What of your children?"

"They are all golden skinned, like their father."

"Curious...do you know anything of the orientation of your peculiar color?" The scientist finished and shut his box. From his table, he lifted another one of those fancy tablets. A blue screen floated up from a silver bar, with numbers, bars, and alien symbols that she did not understand.

"No. I am what I am."

"Right. Then...here is a popular question. Do female Sangheili lay eggs or give live birth?"

Anderson lifted a strange, pipe-like instrument that had a bright, white light streaming from one end. He leaned over and shone the light directly into her eye. She squeezed her eyes shut. "Get your light out of my face, human!" She grumbled, covering her face with her palms and pressing her eyeridges together in discomfort.

Thel stepped forward, "Sangheili eyes are accustomed to the dark. It strains me enough to see in this bright light alone. Please, be careful."

"We had no idea, Lord 'Vadam. I apologize." Facilier nodded to Anderson, who slid away from the table with his instrument.

Kalika didn't open her eyes, but allowed her hands to fall beside her. "Live birth," she said.

Facilier stopped tapping on his tablet and tilted his head at her, "I beg your pardon?"

Kalika wrinkled her muzzle and her tone darkened with impatience, "Your question. We give live birth."

"Oh, oh, of course. Sangheili do have navels, after all." Facilier began to tap on his tablet once more, this time, in a more rapid fashion. "Therefore, you are placental."

"Yes. Next question." Kalika twirled her wrist hurriedly at him.

"Would you consider the Sangheili similar to mammals or reptiles?"

Kalika spoke with a flat tone, "Dr. Face, what is your definition of a... 'mammal'?"

"My name is Dr. Facilier, my Lady."

"I do not care."

Thel gave Kalika a stern look and Dr. Facilier cleared his throat, "Well, erm, mammals are warm-blooded creatures who breastfeed their infants. They are generally characterized by fur, and give live-birth. However, there are exceptions, for example-"

Kalika interrupted abruptly, "And what is your definition of a reptile?"

"Ah...it is a cold-blooded creature, generally with scales, who lay eggs. As an-"

"Neither."

"...Neither?"

"I am afraid that the Sangheili race has yet to be defined by your...human standards. We cool ourselves by sweating, and warm ourselves naturally. We have no hair, but we are placental and give live birth. We do not breastfeed our infants. We regurgitate digested meat into their mouths. Only certain breeds of Sangheili have scales."

Dr. Facilier was rapidly jabbing at his tablet as Kalika spoke. "What do you mean, 'certain breeds'?"

"There are different breeds of Sangheili, human. There are those from the desert, of the golden skin. Sangheili of white skin from the mountains. From the plains come the red. From the swamps, the brown, and the black skinned come from the forests."

"Ah, I see...now tell me, what is the gestation period for Sangheili?"

Dr. Anderson suddenly came forward and placed his hand firmly over Thel's belly, "Do you think he is with child?" He asked in his rasping voice, bringing his face up close to the Arbiter's suit.

Dr. Facilier frowned, "...What?"

The Arbiter stared at Anderson's hand and tilted his head curiously. The hunched scientist began to rub his abdomen, "There are theories that male Sangheili can carry children as well."

Thel cleared his throat, "I can assure you that we do not. Please, remove your hands from my suit."

"Where do you get these ridiculous...theories, Anderson?" Facilier shook his head.

Anderson shrugged, "Online forums."

Facilier groaned softly, "The people on this ship and their blasted online forums...how do you call yourself a scientist, Anderson? Erm, anywayâ€|" He began to smile at the Arbiter warmly, "Gestation period?"

Thel had taken a few steps back, away from Anderson, before replying, "Within 21 to 22 months."

Dr. Facilier's friendly smile faded. His thin, angular eyebrows knit together in concentration and he began to tap furiously at his tablet. "No...that can't be right."

Thel cocked his head to the side, "What is it?"

"Surely, there must be some mistake, then." He mumbled, tapping again and again at the hovering blue screen before him. "Your womb was severely damaged from the wound. How is thisâ€|?" His voice trailed off.

Kalika turned her head to look at him and repeated her husband's question, "What is it?"

Facilier chuckled nervously, "Well...my Lady, ah...this here says that you're eight months pregnant...with twins."

****Author's Notes****

*) Every single "theory" about female elites that you've read in this chapter are actual trending hypothesis that I've found while doing Elite homework. Every. Single. One.

I know. Crazy.

But frikking hilarious.

I'm serious, go look it up. They're all real.

17. Log 16

CONSORT

of the

HERETIC

Created by Cyber and Zmori

Edited by ShoopWoop17

/Access Data Logs

Year 2553, July 6th

Infinity, Orbiting Sanghelios

22:56 Hours

Log 16

Even with the air filters on full blast, it was suffocating in the observation deck. The soft hum of the engines and the steady revolution of the stars across the endless space were the only indications that time was still weaving its complex threads of Fate.

But it wasn't so bad. The black tile was cool against Kalika's skin. The observatory was the only part of the human ship that she didn't have much to complain about. Its interior wasn't completely white and the room itself was enormous. It had a window that curved along the side of the ship and gave a breathtaking view of the stars. The little shining orbs were bright and beautiful, as they always are and always have been.

Curious, Kalika thought. Here she was, with her worries and nuisances, these large problems that needed to be solved, and yet nothing ever seemed to change in the large scale. The constellations are still the same. The stars still show at night. The suns still rise and fall, and the universe lives on. She was reminded of what it

felt like to be small and meaningless in the effects of things.

The tips of her fingers trailed along the edges of her helmet resting on her chest. The armor, that was thought to have been destroyed when the Flood had her, had been salvaged, repaired, and even reinforced thanks to Rtas and his Huragok. Thel surprised her with the gift at the end of the day yesterday.

Kalika couldn't sleep that night, and so she lay on the cold tile of the observatory to let her thoughts roam, hoping that they would let her be after they had run their course. She began to stroke the beautiful feathers on the ends of the faded gold metal. How Rtas had found the new feathers, she had no idea, but they were very gorgeous. They were of great variety in color - there were shimmering golds, forest greens, and then intense purples and blues that glowed with such beauty in the dim light.

"_Mother?_"

Kalika continued to stroke the feathers, but her mind drifted. Warm winds breathed on her skin and the mist of the ocean sprayed at the backs of her bare heels.

"_Yes?_"

"_Why are you leaving for so long?_" The little child's tiny voice chirped.

"_My daughter, I have a duty to the state. This is a responsibility that you will not understand right now, but when you grow older, you will._"

The little Sangheili snuggled her muzzle under her mother's arm. Her eyes glistened like silver with wonder and reflected the glittering sea before her, "_When I grow olderâ€¦_" She sighed dreamily. "_...Will I be strong and beautiful like you?_"

The mother looked upon her precious child and said, "_My little bird, when you grow older, you will be far stronger and more beautiful than I._"

The little one smiled a bright smile, "_How do you know?_"

"_My hearts told me so._"

The child giggled, "_Hearts cannot talk._"

The Lady gasped, "_Why, of course hearts can talk!_"

"_They cannot!_"

Kalika looked down at her little daughter with shifty eyes, "_Hmâ€¦ here, I will prove it to you. Lay your head here._" She tapped her chest under her silky dress.

Ila obeyed and pressed her ears close.

"_What do you hear, little bird?_"

"_I hear...beats._" The child chirped.

The Lady smiled, "_Yes. Heart beats. Do you know what my hearts are saying?_"

Ila listened hard. "_No. I do not speak heart_."

Kalika's laugh was like heart-warming music, "_Then I will tell you what they are saying. Listen close_."

Ila sat up and looked happily up at her. Kalika leaned close to her with a mysterious smile, "_They are sayingâ€| that no matter how far away I may be, and no matter how long I am away from you, you are never alone. I am here_" placing her fingertips over Ila's hearts "_- and I always will be. It is important that you always remember that. Can you do this?_"

Ila nodded eagerly, "_Yes! You will be here_" she tapped her own chest "_- all while you are gone on your trip!_"

Kalika squatted down and pressed her nose against Ila's head, "_That will make me most happy_."

Ila laughed and ran across the sparkling sand ahead of her. Then she stopped and looked out into the red sea. She turned with a puzzled expression.

"_Mother?_"

"_Yes, little bird?_" Kalika called to her.

"_Does that mean that I'm with you too?_"

"_Ila, you will always be with me._"

"_Always? No matter what?_"

Kalika smiled at the stars outside of the observatory. She stopped stroking the soft feathers of her helmet and the ocean faded away before her. Ila, the darling child, with her precious face, her eyes so full of wonder, running toward her with open arms, evanesced before her.

"_Yes, little bird. Always._"

The doors to the observatory opened with a hiss, startling her memory. Kalika lurched up and pulled _Skira_ from her sheath on the belt by her master. The blue blade hissed and shot out, glowing bright in the darkness, her point striking toward the intruder.

"Lady 'Vadam?"

"Oh. My lord, I did not-"

"It is alright. What are you doing up at this hour?"

Kalika lay back down and out at the stars, "I could not sleep, so I came here to dream while I am awake."

The Arbiter nodded his head, "I see." He strode toward her, "Would

you mind if I joined you?"

"I would very much mind."

Thel stopped with a puzzled look. Kalika did not look away from the stars, "But I suppose that I can tolerate it."

"Hm." Thel grunted and sat next to her. "What are you dreaming of?"

Kalika closed her eyes, "Days long gone by."

"What of them?"

Kalika's brain churned and her jaws clenched. "I was changed by themâ€| lashed by a barbed whip and broken by themâ€| and now I am weak in the eyes of my childrenâ€| my husband...and my many enemies."

Thel leaned back on his elbows. "Yes...so you are changed. I do not think that that has made you weak."

Kalika's cat-like eyes blinked open. "No, I am far from weak. I have the strength of 100 warriors. But I must be weak before I can reveal my strength. That is the battle with which I struggle."

Thel nodded. They sat together in silence, not speaking, but understanding.

"Kalika, I-"

At that moment, the doors opened. "Arbiter! Lord 'Vadam!" A human cried, running toward them. Kalika instinctively reached for her blade, but before she could act, he panted, "Rolam Keep was attacked! The war has reached your children!"

* * *

><p>"How could we have been notified so late?" Thel growled. "Almost two days late."<p>

Kalika had not said a word since they had left the observatory. They had dispatched from Infinity on a drop ship to Sanghelios' surface. They were both fully clad in armor and were positioned next to one another amongst 12 human reinforcements. The ship began to groan with outside turbulence as they struck the planet's surface. There were sharp noises of metal on metal screeching through the air.

"What the hell?" One soldier said, holding tightly to his seat.

The Arbiter grunted, "Remnants of war orbit Sanghelios. It makes a thin armor of the planet's atmosphere. The descent will be harsh."

Kalika looked briefly to her husband. He was clearly aggravated. He had his arms crossed over his chest and his golden eyes were blazing like a fire. He was either frustrated with her insistence to accompany him (he gave up when he remembered that Kalika was near impossible to persuade to do anything) or the fact that his keep was in danger - most likely both.

The ship jerked and groaned. The humans shifted uncomfortably in their seats as the metal outside of the Pelican screamed and the ship pitched in strange directions. The two Sangheili remained standing, holding onto the straps that hung from the ceiling.

Suddenly, there was silence. The ship had crashed through the last of Sanghelios' atmosphere. Several humans sagged their heads with relief.

"Approaching the planet's surface." The pilot reported over the intercom.

Thel had one energy blade strapped to his thigh, a pistol on the other, and a heavy carbine on his back. He reached over his shoulder and lifted the heavy Covenant weapon into both arms. He readied the weapon and spoke sternly, "The radars say that there are no signs of life in the keep. I will not depend so naively on this. Everyone is to stay behind me. Everyone." The Arbiter glanced suggestively at Kalika, who blinked innocently back. "Under no circumstance will anyone move ahead of me or stray from the group. Stay close."

Thel moved to the back of the ship and pulled hard on a red metal handle. The back doors began to lower with a low groan. Wind roared and sucked at the everything within just as the ship began to slow down. The Pelican's engines thrummed as they pushed against gravity upwards, hovering the ship above Sanghelios soil.

Looking out, Thel could see sun-lit fields of tall golden grass shimmering white against the wind like layers of ocean, and dark mountainous hills in the distance. As the wind settled, he could smell the sweet freshness of the farms to the west and the dewy delicateness from the forests to the east. South were the mountains, with their sulfuric smells and their dark shadows.

As the Pelican settled, Thel stepped out and into the soft red dirt. The humans followed. One checked his arm, "We're about 3.4 kilometers from the keep."

Thel nodded, pointing his gun around him cautiously, "We must move swiftly and silently." He flared his nostrils, finding a hidden delight at the familiar smells of his homeland. "Watch for Helioskrills. This is their mating season."

"Helio-what?" A man asked.

"Come." The Arbiter said, sliding his carbine back into its holster on his back. He began to trot toward the mouth of the mountains ahead. His heavy armor made gentle rustling noises against his suit and his footfalls were loud, alerting any creatures nearby of their presence.

The humans jogged after him, little shadows in comparison to the massive Sangheili. Kalika had just touched down on the planet, finding the new weight of gravity on her much more comfortable. She was still and gazed out at the suns. Their golden light bathed her in a warm and welcoming embrace. The silver moon was reflected in the red skies to the east. She inhaled the variety of scents around her - the hot grass, the fertile soil, the little Heliomao***** herds to the west.

Her blue eyes were silver in the light as she looked after the men running toward Rolam keep. Her armor was bright, nearly white. Her boots could feel the warmth of the rocky soil beneath her.

Then, in silence, she ran after them.

The Pelican took off humming in the distance behind them.

They ran steadily for thirty minutes. Their movements made gentle rustling noises in the dry grass. The humans breathed sharply through their mouths and Thel loudly through his nostrils, snorting when he sucked in too much too suddenly.

The terrain had changed drastically since they had started to run. The soft fields suddenly dropped off into red rocky hills with little to no grass. The rocks would slip under the human's boots and make their footing unsure.

A faded path cut through the Telark mountains, offering shadows and sharp crags to those who entered. Thel slowed to a stop before the mouth, hefting his carbine into his arms and smelling the cool air. His radars said nothing and blinked emptily in his HUD lenses. He motioned the humans forward and he strode on.

The humans readied their weapons and walked into formation; three behind Thel, six on either flank, and three toward the back. Their eyes were darting back and forth wearily along the dark shadows of the crags that hugged close to them. Their heads were low and their strong shoulders were hunched forward to support their battle rifles.

Kalika walked calmly behind them all. Her head was high and her eyes were focused firmly ahead. The keep loomed in the distance as a faint grey shadow between the tiny crevices of the mountain sides. The skin on the back of her neck and on the tip of her muzzle was tingling. She wanted to say that something was wrong, but she couldn't say what exactly. She smelled the air.

There was the metallic scent of blood mixed with something...alien. Had the humans attacked? Was this a trap? It easily could have been. The humans first made them feel hospitalized, fed them, and now isolate them with only their men for an attempt of assassination? Surely, Thel had thought this through?

Then again, Thel, as of the current moment, had a clouded mind.

_Hm..._but they had questioned nothing when she took the following position. She checked behind herself. There was nothing but the dusty path and the red rocky canopy. Up above, the suns were too bright to see much of anything. Kalika focused on the keep ahead, scrutinizing for anything suspicious. Did the humans have any sort of reason to ambush them? Not that she knew of, but that didn't mean anything.

The valley began to open up. Kalika could now see the detail of Rolam's tall stone walls. The keep had only a heavy decorated door peeking out from the base of the cliff before them, and then terraces and walls about fifty feet above them. The doors were broken apart

and shattered. The pieces were scattered about on the ground, and dried on the stone were pools of dark purple blood.

Thel curled his lips with an angry scowl. He stepped over the debris and surveyed the interior of the keep. The walls were beaten and torn apart. There was blood everywhere, but...there were no bodies. No organs or flesh. No weapons, no armor. There was only Sangheili blood and debris.

"...What happened here?" A human asked, wrinkling his nose at the rancid smell.

The Arbiter was silent and moved forward. The hall was very wide and tall with monstrous pillars that shot upward. The tile beneath them was so destroyed and stained so thickly with blood that its illustrations could not be depicted. There were precise cuts in the pillars high up above them. Kalika observed them with curiosity.

"Something big came through here." She said, pointing at enormous holes that were consistent in the tile.

"How could anything big get in here without completely destroying the door?" Thel grumbled. Nothing was making sense. The marines had their flashlights shining into the shadows, revealing only more mysterious blood and debris.

Plink! Kalika flinched. Something had dripped on her helmet. She swiped at the metal where she had felt the impact, and on her glove was a vivid purple color. She looked up.

"...Thel."

"Hush, Kalika." Thel said suddenly. There was a soundâ€¦ a moaning. Ahead, a wide set of stairs led up to a large archway. Behind the archway were tall stairs leading up into the shadows. He climbed the first set and searched the shadows for the origin of the strange sound.

"Thel." Kalika said sternly.

The Arbiter looked to her. She was in the center of the room looking toward the curved ceiling. He too looked up and saw something most curious. "Whatâ€¦?" Thel stepped down. Blood was smeared all over and stark white skeletons were piled there...somehow stuck to the ceiling.

"...Who would be demented enough toâ€¦?" Thel's jaws were spread in disbelief.

"Neru Pe 'Odosima?" Kalika asked.

One of the marines on the right flank turned his head, "Neru pey what?"

"The Servants of Abiding Truth. They're a deranged religious bunch."

Thel shook his head, "Unlikely. They went silent shortly before you woke up on the human ship." He breathed in shakily, "Let us move on."

He led the group through the damaged archway and to the bottom of the stairs. They escalated as quickly and silently as possible, shining lights into corners and ceilings.

The staircase finally ended and had led them to the dining hall. A great wooden table took up the center of the hall. It was broken in half down the center. The beautiful tapestries that once hung on the walls were torn and tossed to the ground, as were the drapes that hung by the doors. Blood trickled in rivulets down the small stairs leading to the hall's floor. The group split in half alongside the table and met up again at the end of the hall, where the doors opened up into another hallway.

This corridor had scents familiar to Kalika. The hallway had open archways with torn blankets hanging in front of them. She trotted ahead of the group.

"Kalika!" Thel growled, reaching for her arm. She snatched away and tossed aside the blankets. She entered a room that had a fire dimly glowing in the center. Small stairs led to the center of the room where the fireplace was, and around it were blankets. They were all tossed aside, some shredded, others scrunched up against the walls. There was one object that caught Kalika's attention. She snatched the thing off of the floor. "Valina" she whispered.

Thel shortly entered. "I told you-

"Valina." Kalika repeated and tossed the object into Thel's hands.

He caught it and, after analyzing it, tilted his head. "A sash?"

Kalika nodded, "It belongs to her."

Thel was very quiet for a while. "...Do you think-?"

"No."

"How do you know?"

"I know." Kalika growled and stormed out of the room.

Thel felt the sash in between his fingers. It wasn't particularly pretty. It was a raggedy brown thing with holes in it. He tied it around his wrist snugly. Then, he followed Kalika.

He met with the humans in the hallway. His head suddenly jerked to the left. "There it is again."

"What?" One of the humans asked, swinging his battle rifle around.

"That noise." Thel growled, hefting his weapon toward the end of the hallway. Whatever it was, it was groaning, and then there was squealing. The Arbiter rushed forward toward the end of the hallway, but it was only a dead end. There was a tapestry there that had been completely untouched. No blood, no tears, no rips.

Thel tore the tapestry off of the wall and flung it to the ground.

The sound was definitely on the other side of the wall. He pressed his ear to the wall and listened. Somebody was talking. It was muffled and extremely difficult to hear, but someone was definitely talking. Between him and the sound, there were only thick heavy bricks.

"Back up." Thel commanded. Everyone obeyed as Thel primed a plasma grenade. He stepped quickly away and tossed it toward the wall. He looked away as the blue fire grew suddenly bright and exploded loudly. When he looked back, the bricks were completely unscathed. The grenade had done nothing. He ground his teeth angrily.

Kalika rolled her eyes and came before the wall. One of the bricks were significantly unaligned with the others. She pressed her palm to it, and the brick clicked. There was a loud booming sound in the distance just as the entire wall began to slide toward the floor.

One of the marines gasped excitedly, "Just like Indiana Jones!"

The others looked at him with annoyance.

"...huge fanâ€¦"

Before them loomed a black darkness. Everything had gone very quiet.

Thel silently came forth, his weapon at the ready. His breathing was loud in his ears and his hearts pounded heavily in his chest.

His radar beeped loudly at him. He nearly dropped his weapon. A dot was quickly coming toward his icon. He looked into the darkness and saw nothing. Then he could hear footsteps. They were rapidly sounding on the floor. Thel tried to silence his breathing, but adrenaline made him clumsy and noisy.

There was a little shadow ahead coming fast toward him. Thel's finger tightened on the trigger. One of the humans shined their light at the creature.

The little one stopped with wide hazel eyes.

"...Uncle Thwel?"

****Author's Notes****

*****Heliomao are small, ferocious rodent creatures common to the dry plains of Sanghelios.

18. Log 17

CONSORT

of the

HERETIC

Created by Cyber and Zmori

Edited by ShoopWoop17

/Access Data Logs

Year 2553, July 7th

Rolam Keep, Sanghelios

5:26 Hours

Log 17

"Valina?"

The little Sangheilli looked with wide, bright hazel eyes at the armed humans standing with their weapons pointed at her head. She tilted her head curiously at the deadly barrel of one of their rifles. She appeared to be unscathed and ignorant of the scene outside of the doors. Valina's little nubs spread outward and her cheeks lifted up in a sweet smile. She pattered up to the Arbiter and held out her arms for a hug.

She hugged his armored leg tightly, her fingertips barely touching. The Arbiter looked into the darkness beyond her, protectively searching for any danger that may be lurking.

"Aawâ€| she's so cuteâ€|" Said one of the marines closest to the door.

Valina turned her head away from the cold metal of the Arbiter's boot to look for the human who had complimented her. Then she blushed shyly and butted her muzzle against Thel's armor, peeking with her adorable face toward the marine.

The human smiled kindly to her, "I don't mean you any harm, little Elite. See?" He knelt to the floor and set his battle rifle upon it. Valina watched him with keen amusement. Then she looked up at the Arbiter, who smiled to her and nodded.

Then she turned hesitantly back to the human. She released her grasp on the Arbiter's leg gradually. Very suddenly, Valina smiled brightly and trotted to the human, opening her arms for another hug.

The marine, not expecting her to become friendly so fast, and not having any experience with Sangheili younglings, froze for a moment in surprise. She tripped on her toes just before she reached him.

"Whoa!" He said and caught her. She began to giggle profusely as he lifted her up into his lap. "Be careful!"

Valina simply giggled with delight as she looked him up and down. She tugged at his fingers and he opened his palm for her. She placed her palm against his glove to compare the sizes of their hands. He could feel the light pressure of her tiny hand against the center of his palm and smiled for it.

"How cwome you hwave a extwa fingwer?" Valina asked in her slurred speech, pulling at his pinky.

He chuckled, "It helps me hold on to things better, I suppose."

She said nothing, for she couldn't understand anything that he was saying. It took him a moment to remember that she didn't have an AI to translate their languages like he and the marines did.

"Valina, where are the others? Why are you alone?" Thel asked gently.

Valina looked up to him, "Thwey went swum pwace ewse. I was hewe with the Hon-hon...hon-"

"Honor Guard?"

"Yes. But thwey weft to fwight. So now I wam hewe."

The marine's smile faded slightly, "Wow...you've been in here in the dark all by yourself? You must be very, very, very brave."

"And hungwy!" Getting the general gist of what the human had said, Valina suddenly gasped and slapped her tummy. "I wam swo hungwy!"

"I bet you are!" The marine reached for his backpack.

Thel shook his head. "That still does not make much sense. Why would you be separated from all the others?"

Kalika's eyes appeared out of the darkness ahead. Her armor glinted in the light of their flashlights as she approached, "The room is completely clean. No blood. No other doors."

She glared at Valina icily. "Get off of the human's lap, Valina. You are embarrassing."

The human's smile faded as he took out his beef jerky. "Oh, no, really, she's fine. She isn't doing anything wrong."

Kalika curled her lips and snarled with warning toward Valina.

The marine looked down at the youngling, only to find that she was gone. Looking up, he saw that she was now standing behind Thel, chewing on his beef jerky. He looked into his hand, bewildered. When did sheâ€|?

Valina chewed happily at the jerky. She couldn't tear the meat at all with her tiny little nubs.

Kalika growled with annoyance, "Stupid human, the imbecile will choke to death." She stormed forward and snatched the jerky away from her.

"Hey!" The marine cried.

Valina began to whimper, but Kalika silenced her with a reprimanding shudder in her throat.

She sat down before Valina, crossing her legs and putting the jerky in her fanged jaws. She chewed profusely and began to take little bits and pieces of mushed jerky into her fingers, handing them to Valina.

Valina took the mashed up meat and then swallowed them down. She sighed with pleasure.

Meanwhile, the Arbiter looked away and began to scout the halls. "Take Valina back to the ship. The marines and I will search for the rest of the keep for the others."

Kalika suddenly spit the jerky out, "I am not leaving yet."

Thel curled his lips, "I will not argue with you. Take her back. I cannot endanger the young one. We do not know what the threat is, just yet."

Kalika tossed the chewed up jerky ball to Valina, who stared at her in confusion. Kalika snorted at her, "You are old enough now so that I do not have to regurgitate for you. You are a burden enough as it is."

The humans frowned at her for her attitude toward the little one. As disgusting as regurgitating sounded, Valina didn't deserve this from her.

Kalika ignored their disapproving looks. "Come then, and keep up."

The marine from before dropped his jaw in disbelief, "Don't make her go back through that! She's not old enough to see that yet!"

"She is Sangheili." Kalika said. Her bright blue eyes glistened icily in the dim light. "Move." She nodded the child ahead. Valina happily skipped ahead of her, and Kalika followed. The two disappeared behind the corner and their footsteps faded in the distance.

The marine swiveled his head to the Arbiter, "You let your wife treat her like that?"

The Arbiter was silent and moved ahead down the hallway.

* * *

><p>"Mama?"<p>

"What, Valina?"

"Where awe we gwoing?"

Kalika walked slowly as Valina struggled to reach her legs down the steep steps.

"Someplace safe."

Valina fumbled on one of the stairs and fell flat on her stomach with a squeaky, "Oof!" Kalika stopped and sighed impatiently. She waited and watched as Valina moved back up to her feet, giggling and looking back up to her mother with a big smile, "Was thwat fwunny, Mama? Did thwat make you sm-smiwle?"

Kalika looked stoically into Valina's bright, happy eyes, who stopped to wait for her response. Valina's smile very slowly began to relax

and become less and less enthusiastic. "It dwid not, dwid it?"

Kalika nodded her head forward, "Move along."

Valina happily obeyed and fumbled on down the stairs. After a long while of nothing but staircases, Valina had begun to breathe heavily. She didn't seem to have taken notice of the enormous stains of blood until she reached the colossal room with decorated tile and tall pillars. "What is tha puwpul?"

"Blood, Valina. Keep moving."

Valina stood very still and stared at the pools about her bare feet. "Why...why is thewe bwood?"

"I do not know."

"Mamaâ€¦"

Kalika growled impatiently, "What?"

"I...I wam afwaidâ€¦" The little Sangheili clutched to the armor on her mother's leg.

Kalika shoved her off. "Fear is an illusion, Valina. It is not real. Go forward."

Valina whimpered and held her hands very tightly. Her little nose began to twitch as the metallic scent of the blood singed its glands. She stumbled forward with her mother close behind, eyeing the shadows that had become so much more intimidating than before.

Kalika placed her fingertips gently on Valina's shoulder as a reminder that she was there behind her. "Fear is the lag in life, Valina. It is what keeps you from your goals; your dreams. Fear is only an illusion fabricated by your mind."

Valina, reassured by her mother's touch, quickened her pace.

"It is your duty to recognize your fearâ€¦" Kalika and Valina stopped before one of the massive craters on the floor, "...and then to overcome it. See past the illusion." She motioned her hand toward the crater, and then toward the light at the end of the corridor. "You are almost there. Go forward."

"Bwut we cwan jwust gwo awound!"

"Go through the hole, Valina."

Valina gazed down into the crater, and then up to the sunrays showering through the doorway. She looked at the crater once more, sucked in a little breath, and hopped down. She scuttled as fast as her little legs would carry her across the cracked floor and sharp edges. When she reached the end, she breathlessly observed the edge of the crater towering above her. She bent down, jumped, and reached for the edge.

She missed by a few centimeters and fell against the jagged wall. She yelped and slid back to the bottom clutching her knee. Little Valina

began to sob in pain as tiny tears slid down her purpled cheeks.
"Mama!" She cried.

"Stand up, Valina." Kalika was now on the other side of the crater with her, looking down at her, waiting.

"It huwts!"

Kalika crouched down. "Another illusion of the mind; pain. See past it. Address the situation at hand."

Valina remained curled up in a ball and clutched her knee close to her body. An ugly cut was embedded in the skin and purple blood flowed thinly down her leg. "Mama!" She wailed. "It huwts!"

"Stand, Valina."

"I cwan nwot!"

"You can."

"Hewlp me!"

"I can do nothing to help you."

Valina continued to cry, gasping through her mandibles for breath.
"It huwts!"

"Stand up, Valina. Pain is not real. It is a protective mechanism from your nervous system. See past it. Stand."

The little Sangheili felt so weak, "I cwan nwot!"

Kalika stood, "Then you will be left behind."

Fear gripped Valina like a giant had crushed her in its palm. "No!" She shrieked, "Dwo nwot weave!"

"Then make the choice, and stand." Kalika began to walk away toward the light.

Valina didn't want to stand. Her knee was in so much pain that it quaked. But more than that, she didn't want to be abandoned and alone. She released her knee and slowly began to push herself up. Her breathing was heavy, but she blinked past it and rose up. She squinted up at the edge. She couldn't see the light from the doorway anymore, but she knew that it was there. She bent her legs once more and jumped. Her little fingers caught the edge, and somehow, her feet scrambled onto uneven rock that supported her.

Kalika continued to walk, but when she looked over her shoulder, there was little Valina, trotting briskly up to her.

"I mwade the chwoice, Mama." Valina said proudly, limping gently to emphasize the struggle that she had just gone through. "I stwood up all bwy my swelf."

"Hm." Was all Kalika had to say.

The two exited the building in silence, leaving behind Rolam Keep in

the crevice of the mountains and stepping onto the red path. The path led them out of the mountains and upon the rocky hills.

"Mama?"

Kalika snorted, "Silence, child."

Valina obeyed and trailed behind her. The silvery clouds were moving fast across the winds above them, and the golden plains beckoned them ahead with their shimmering grasses. An hour had passed before they reached them, and it was there that Kalika turned and said to her daughter, "Remain close."

Valina nodded to her and followed her into grass three times the height of her. For hours more, they walked. It wasn't until they had delved so deep into the plains that the mountains were hazy in the distance that Kalika began to pick up on something irregular. A different scent had come across the wind to the east. Valina panted wearily behind her, still having not complained or said much of anything since they had left the Keep.

"Stop." Kalika commanded quietly. She crouched down onto all fours.

Td...td...td td...td...td...td tdâ€|

The sound was ahead. Kalika's eyes narrowed. Her heart began to beat quickly.

"M-?"

Kalika whirled around fast and grabbed Valina's mandibles harshly, warning her silently to make no sound.

Td td tdâ€| td tdâ€| tdâ€| td td td...td td...tdâ€|

Now the sound was behind them. Kalika's pupils were so narrowed that Valina could barely see them. Valina looked at her with confusion and fear. The grass shifted to her left.

Kalika pulled Valina close to her. Very slowly, her palm reached for her waist.

Td td td td td td td td td td td td td td td-

The sound stopped. Valina noticed something in the grass and gasped, "Wocks! Wocks!" She whispered.

"Stay down." Kalika hissed.

A giant head rose above the tops of the grass, blocking out the sun. Kalika's pupils suddenly aggrandized and her hand flew to her sword. _Skira_ crackled and shot out as Kalika swung her arms in a wide arc, cutting grass and striking a creature hard in its shoulder.

The giant reptile shrieked and leapt away. Kalika crouched down low over Valina and roared viciously at the creature, who slowly stalked closer, eyeing Valina hungrily with its bright golden eyes. Again, Kalika roared a blood-curdling challenge, swinging her sword through

the grass around her, cutting it to be level with her hips.

The Helioskrill were one of the deadliest predators on Sanghelios. They were blood-thirsty hunters who made their homes in the the plains. Their most advanced stealth mechanism is their ability to crouch and seem like rock and stone, thanks to their heavy armor being textured as such. Despite the extra weight of their armor, they were one of the fastest creatures known to the planet. Allow me to reemphasize - ridiculously fast.

Generally, it took a group of ten Sangheili hunters to take down a pack of Helioskrill. Here, there must have been at least five of them and there was only Kalika.

Movement to the left. Kalika swung. Her blade caught the Helioskrill directly in the armored part of its skull. She drew her second energy sword from her hip as she yanked the Helioskrill toward her, who roared at her in surprise. _Anari _came forth and stuck the Helioskrill directly in the eye. The great beast screamed and wrestled away, but the jagged edge of Skira kept it in its place. Two other Helioskrill shot toward her.

With a great bellow, Kalika dragged the Helioskrill in their direction. Her adrenaline gave her enough strength to at least block the creatures. With a shriek, Kalika dug _Anari _deeper into the creature's eye until it twitched on the ground. Valina shivered underneath Kalika, covering her face with her hands.

One Helioskrill jumped up on top of his fallen brethren and spread his jagged jaws in a challenging roar. To that, Kalika jerked Skira out of the dead reptile and used the momentum to cut the bottom jaw of the one on top. The spiked fins behind the Helioskrill's head shot out as it screamed in pain and yanked away from her blade. They slinked back into the grass, hissing viciously.

Kalika reassured herself and tapped Valina. "Are you alright?"

The little Sangheili shivered violently.

"Valina!"

"Mhm.." Valina said.

The four reptiles were circling them in the grass. Which one would pounce first?

Kalika turned in place, keeping the points of her blades to the shadows where the grass bent. Her muzzle wrinkled with her curled lips and her bare fangs. Rage characterized her facial expression, and the grace of a warrior molded her balanced stance. Her growl was threatening and deep, rumbling like rolling thunder in her throat. Her icy eyes were wide, bright, her pupils narrowed into those of a hunter, and her blood pumped wildly through her veins.

The creatures were not expecting her next move. She kicked Valina forward, who screamed in surprise more than pain, and swung her blade at the heart of one of the reptiles. The creature shrieked as the point of Kalika's blade skimmed its shoulder instead. Kalika stepped over Valina, who had curled up into a ball once again beneath her. She held her ground, hacking away at the Helioskrill. The great beast

reared up on its thick hind legs, swinging its long, spiked tail through the grass with a mighty shriek. When it lashed out with its arms, the soft grey skin beneath its armor plates were exposed. On either side, Kalika stabbed her two swords forward and drove them into the reptile's ribcage.

Two Helioskrill on either side shot toward her. She pulled her swords free, but not in time to counter. Both charged her and hit her hard in the shoulder and waist, knocking her hard into the ground.

Valina was exposed and there was still a third.

The two reptiles dove their heads toward Kalika with their long toothy snouts, into which, Kalika took opportunity to shove the tips of her blades down their throats. Both screamed in pain and were sent writhing into the grass. She leapt to her feet and ran toward Valina. She wasn't going to make it. The Helioskrill crouched and grabbed Valina in its clawed foot.

Kalika screamed and tossed Skira into the air, snatched it in mid-rotation, and with precision and speed, threw it at the creature like a javelin.

Time slowed. There was the sword, spiraling in the air. There was the Helioskrill, its head bowing, jaws open, black teeth sharp, enveloping Valina. There was little Valina, eyes wide, silent, and shivering. The grass became still with the tension of breath from the wind. There was the tip of the sword, and there was the creature-

The sword cut the raptor directly through its head. The Helioskrill froze, hesitated, and then fell onto its side with a hush from the grass. Valina remained huddled into a ball and began to sob silently.

Kalika ran forward and crouched over Valina protectively. She swiveled in the grass toward the sound of movement to her left. Six other heads stared vacantly at her over the grass. Six, long-snouted, tall Helioskrills, pondering, calculating with their large brains.

Kalika took hold of the snout of the dead Helioskrill beside her very firmly and bore her fangs. Her eyes were wide, her pupils barely visible, mandibles spread, and a defiant roar split through her throat. Then she hissed, spat, growled, and hissed again, followed by another roar. The Helioskrills' twitched hesitantly, gazing upon their dead brethren, at the little meal beneath the mother, and spread the fins at the back of their heads. They too were growling and hissing, but none returned the challenging roar.

One last time, a fierce shriek, a threatening roar thundered from Kalika. She released the dead Helioskrill and now took hold of Valina's neck. "Mine," she said to them through guttural growls. She snorted in their direction, warning them to back away.

One by one, the heads shrunk back into the grass. Kalika stayed that way for a long time until she could hear the footsteps of the great beasts no more.

* * *

><p>"Everybody, wake up!"<p>

Netu blinked wearily in the brightness. "Hm?"

"There is something out there!"

Netu shot upright and fumbled off of the rock that she had been napping on. Her eyes took only seconds to adjust. Before her stood one of her younger sisters- one of the twins. "Mena?"

"Shh! Come on!"

"Alright, alright." She ducked under the rock above her head. Ever since the attack, she and her siblings had hidden in the depths of Rolam's mountains. Here, torches lit the slick, black walls with orange and yellow light. It turned the black pools of water into fiery surfaces that reflected their faces. It was cold, but the air was easy to breathe.

Mena trotted briskly ahead. Both she and her twin sister, Sena, were both nine cycles of age. They were very skinny, and both had skin the shades of dark gold. What characterized them the most was their wide, mischievous eyes. It was hard to tell when they were ever up to something. Their siblings were always waiting for their next troublesome plot.

The cave opened up into a large cavern where the rest of her siblings were. Stalactites hung dangerously from the ceiling, their tips sparkling with water droplets. A great lake spanned underneath a wall of rock to Netu's left, which could be heard gurgling down under the surface. Now all twenty-two of them were in the same room together. Her seven older siblings seemed to be in the middle of an argument.

One of her oldest brothers, Lakei, seemed to be reprimanding her naive brother Yo'lo for something. "Do you want us all to be killed?"

Yo'lo had his fists firm at his sides, his chest puffed forward, "No! I want to keep us alive by going out to be rid of the threat!"

Lakei snorted, "You are an idiot."

"I will go with him!" Voro piped. Voro was only six cycles of age, and already, he was obtaining a bizarre need to seek out adventure in everything.

"Silence. No one is leaving." Lakei growled.

"Who put you in charge?" Telin snarled in return.

Lakei and Telin were always at the opposite ends of the argument with each other. While Lakei argued logic and politics, Telin used what the religious books said to justify his every act. Both, at times, bent the facts a little to get their way.

"Ral did."

Telin crossed his arms. "Who says he has the authority to make you

the leader?"

Lakei pulled his lips back and motioned his hand through the air, "I do not have time for this childish nonsense!"

Telin shrugged his shoulders, "I just do not like to follow someone so...hm...what is the wordâ€|"

Lakei stepped forward, "Be quiet!"

"Temper! Temper!" Telin clucked at him.

"I swear, when the Lady returns, I will have her-"

A large hand was placed on Lakei's shoulder and it gently pulled him back. Lakei looked up to his sister, The'za. She shook her head at him.

The'za was the tallest out of all of her siblings. She never spoke much unless necessary. She was most often mistaken for a male, thanks to her wide shoulders, intimidating muscles, and bulky build, a trait most likely retained from her grandfather. The'za could always be found in the training grounds, and for that, she was a ferocious fighter in combat. Otherwise, she could be found picking flowers amongst the fields if they were in season. Although she could be menacing, everyone knew what big and caring hearts she had.

Lakei took one look into her big hazel eyes and sighed heavily, "Yes, you are right, The'za."

She nodded and returned to leaning on the wall with her arms crossed, calmly observing the scene unfold.

Netu ran forward. "Telin, you are being awfully mean. Lakei, stop reacting to him. You are only giving him more to jab at you."

"Ah, Netu, our little peacemaker." Telin teased, but said no more after that.

Netu grabbed the edges of her dress nervously, but continued to address her older brother, "I just do not like for you to be fighting all of the time."

Crea was fed up. "Enough with the drama. Something is out there." She stood up from crouching on her rock and stepped forward. "I have a plan." Crea was the only sibling who seemed to remotely resemble Kalika. Her skin was an almost black color, but her eyes were a sterling blue. She was of an average height and weight for a female Sangheili, and like her mother, had a gorgeous curvy body. She was of seventeen cycles of age, and as one of the more experienced siblings, was respected for her talent to create the best strategies and plans for almost any situation. "Whatever it is, it is coming our way and will find us soon. I say we set up a trap at the entrance and charge the thing head on."

Lakei scratched at an itch on his nose, "What if 'it' is in great numbers?"

Crea crouched down and began to draw a representation of the caverns with her finger. "The tunnel here is very narrow. If we could find

some shields to attack from behind with long weapons, numbers will be no matter."

"I have one last deployable cover shield." Lakei lifted the grey and red contraption off of his belt. "Does anyone have any weapons?"

Most shook their heads, with murmurs of "I have no ammunition" or "I lost it" or "She took it and I have no idea what happened to it" etc.

Lakei sighed, "Thesa?"

The eldest sister was busy smoothing her fingernails on a textured stick. She was sitting on a fanciful pillow on a rock with her dainty legs crossed over each other. How she managed to keep the pillow through the battle, no one knew. She batted her eyelids carelessly, "You know that I have no care for weapons."

Crea scoffed and rolled her eyes, "You just hate getting your pretty dresses dirty."

Thesa stopped filing her nails and narrowed her gaze at Crea, "They are very expensive. I would be more useful sitting here, thank you very much."

Lakei nodded, "Then you can watch over the young ones."

Thesa gasped, "I do beg your pardon?"

He shrugged, "If you will not help with the plan, then you will be left here to care for the young ones."

Thesa turned to look at her younger siblings, who were currently playing some wrestling game on the other side of the room. Most were slinging mud at each other, covering their mouths to refrain from laughing too loudly. She groaned and put her index finger to her temples, "Alright, alright, I will help." Thesa put away her textured stick in her decorated satchel on her hip. She dusted off the long skirt of her beautiful dress. The dress itself was a light purple color and made of a thick kind of silk common to most fanciful Sangheili clothes. The dress had translucent silks hanging from behind her body, and was pinned up in the front to make room for her knees. It had swirling designs sweeping across her smaller hips with a dark, purple thread that accented the curves of her body. Thesa was very thin, very feminine looking, and very beautiful in her own way. Her eyes were thin with a graceful almond-shaped pinch, and her irises were gold with speckled shades of silver. Her skin was a sun gold color and she had tiny freckles in the corners of her eyes. Her personality is self explanatory.

With a huff, she lifted herself up off of the pillow and swayed her hips to and fro on her way to join the older siblings in their circle. "What services do you require of me?" She crossed her arms and leaned on one leg.

Crea crouched down again. "Lakei, The'za, and D'san will charge the tunnel at the corner here and Lakei will drop his shield. At that point, The'za and D'san will take positions behind it with their spears. Then-"

"Can I just stay and watch the younglings?" D'san interrupted. The last older sibling that will be described for now is known to run from any sign of danger or threat. D'san is of an average height for a male Sangheili with a lean body. He was often times the scout for the group for his stealth and dexterity, but avoided fights at all costs, despite the honor it cost him.

Crea curled her lips, "You are following The'za with your spear, you coward."

D'san shifted uncomfortably, "But I hurt my toe running on the way over here...and it hurts...so I am not fit for-"

Crea glared up at her brother.

"...I will go with The'za." D'san gulped.

Crea snorted and returned to sketching her diagram in the moist ground. "Tre' is not here to take your place D'san. Now, where was I oh, yes. Once Lakei's shield is near deactivating, you will all fall back to this position behind this rock formation, where Thesa, Telin, Yo'lo, and I will be waiting. Our only shot is to charge 'it' from there with our close-combat weapons."

"This seems like a very skeptical plan." Thesa sniffed. "We do not even know what 'it' is. Are you trying to get us killed?"

Crea groaned. "I have explained numerous times before hand that there can be no more than seven of them. They are Sangheili, most likely from the attack. They should be easy targets."

"Should be." Thesa began to observe her nails once more.

"I hate you." Crea hissed.

"Settle down, ladies." Lakei said, observing Crea's plan. All were silent for a long while as Lakei's eyes darted back and forth over Crea's diagram. Then he sighed, "It seems like this is the best we are going to get out of what we have. Let us-"

BANG!

Everyone fell silent and all heads swiveled to the tunnel leading out of the cavern. Lakei and Crea looked at each other.

"They are in." Crea whispered.

Lakei nodded and pointed with his two index fingers toward the tunnel, a signal to get into positions. The'za took the lead silently down the tunnel and unsheathed her heavy spear from her back. Crea had to shove D'san to get him to move. After them followed Thesa, Yo'lo, and Telin. Lakei stayed behind just for a moment and approached Netu. He crouched down in front of her, grabbed one of her shoulders, and pointed his two index fingers at the younger ones.

"Watch them?" He asked with his eyes.

Netu gave him an exasperated expression, "Why always me?", but she

nodded once to him.

Lakei butted his muzzle against his young sister's head in silent thanks, and then stood, turning to run after the others. Netu sighed and went to tend to her younger siblings.

The seven of them dodged the jagged rocks of the tunnels silently as they sped. Lakei wouldn't let D'san fall behind them and at times had to tap him on the back to get him to speed up. The air was cold on their skin down here, but steadily became easier to breathe as they neared the entrance to the caverns. It was an hour walk to get to their little base deep in the caverns, but at the pace that The'za had set, they would be at their destination within twenty minutes. The tunnels split off and split again from each other in directions every which way, but The'za only had to follow her nose to know where she was going.

With suddenness, The'za dug the balls of her feet into the sand and thrust out both of her arms to block her brothers from crashing into her. Her golden eyes were wide and her nostrils flared with a familiar scent. She had not smelled it in a very long time. Who was it? Friend? or enemy?

She crouched down low and beckoned over her shoulder. They were at the position that Crea had demonstrated. Crea and Thesa drew their thin metal daggers, Lakei, Yo'lo and Telin their swords, and D'san his spear.

Lakei crawled on all fours up to The'za, and over his shoulders held up an open hand. He bent his thumb; four. Then his index finger; three. Two-

Yo'lo jumped up and charged with a battle-cry,
"YAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHH!"

"YO'LO, YOU IDIOT!" Crea screamed.

Lakei sucked in a breath and ran forward. He pumped his legs back and forth as fast as they would carry him to catch up with his brother.

"HOLD YOUR FIRE!" Someone yelled from the opposite end of the hallway. The'za had begun to follow but stopped at the sound of his voice.

Lakei and Yo'lo had stopped in their tracks as well.

"What is it?" Thesa hissed.

Crea squinted at the end of the tunnel. She gasped and began to stand, "Uncle Thel! He is here!" She sprinted off, kicking up sand with her feet.

The Arbiter placed his carbine upon his back and smiled, "We have found them."

"Uncle Thel!" Crea squealed and hugged him hard under the arms. "You have returned home!" Thel began to chuckle and hugged her in return. Crea suddenly gasped realizing her mistake, "I- oh- forgot- um, I mean-" Crea pulled away and fell to one knee, "Arbiter...please

forgive me."

Again, Thel smiled, "It is alright, Crea. Please rise. Goodness, you have grown since I last saw you."

Crea stood as her brothers caught up behind her breathless. "It has been too long."

Lakei put his fist over his hearts and bowed his head, "My lord. Welcome home."

Thel nodded with a renewed smile, "It is good to see you, Lakei. Where are the others?"

Lakei lifted his eyes to look into those of the Arbiter. "Safe in the depths of these caverns. It is about an hour's walk down this tunnel."

"Very well. Lead on. We must return them home."

Suddenly, The'za was upon Thel, grabbing his arm with a low, rumbling growl, and with a deep voice inquired, "What the hell are they doing here?"

The humans had just pointed their battle rifles to the floor when The'za approached. Thel placed his hand reassuringly now to The'za's arm, "It is alright. They are friends."

Crea's snout was wrinkled with her bared teeth, "Since when are we friends with the humans?"

With rustling noises from their armor, several of the marines put their hands up****. "We come in peace." Said one of the men.

"They are friends, I promise you. They have proven their trustworthiness to me. Have faith." Thel said and smiled to Crea.

The'za immediately relaxed and stood still. Crea could not let it go. Her mandibles were spread as if she were going to hiss, "Arbiter...forgive meâ€| but they have killed millions of our people."

Thel's expression shifted into one of remorse, "And so we have unto them as well. We must move on, Crea. Forgive them."

Crea maintained her infuriated glare toward the humans, but said no more on the matter. She turned her back to them and clenched her fists at her sides, "This way."

****Author's Notes****

***IN THE AIR SOMETIMES, SAYIN' AAAYYOOOO, GOTTA LET G- Sorry.**

19. CHRISTMAS SPECIAL - 2014

Consort of the Heretic

CHRISTMAS SPECIAL - 2014

Written by Zmori and Shoopwoopl7

Edited by Cyber

****NOTE:** Nothing written here is meant to be canon to Halo or to CoTH, so don't have a heart attack. I had numerous requests for a Christmas special, so just for fun, I did it. Yes, yes, it's the 27th, but close enough, right? Right? The editor is off on break, so I'm not going to make him edit during the holidays. I took this chance to put in some fun roleplays that I've done with other people in here too, soâ€¦ yeah, that should be fun. ******

****I'd** also like to take this chance to thank all of my supporters and all of the fans of CoTH. This story wouldn't be here if it didn't have readers who loved it. (Psst! If you love the story, then you might like the art too! (zmori . deviantart . Â©0m / *****gallery/45992875/Consort-Of-The-Heretic*****) Just take out the spaces and replace the alt codes.)
>

****Thank you, from the bottom of my heart. Have fun, enjoy, and Merry Christmas!****

/Accessing Data Recording

Year 2555, December 15th

'Vadam Keep

2:34 Hours

The fields surrounding 'Vadam keep hadn't seen snow in two full cycles. It was a thin layer coating the dark dirt, a pillowy soft white substance that was uncertain in its pathway. Thel pondered quietly whether or not the keep would see it in greater number as the winter season progressed.

It just so happened that the seasons of Sanghelios and Earth were in tangent with one another this year, according to his human allies; at least at their original homes in a land called "America". The snow on Earth was different in texture compared to the snow on Sanghelios. Thanks to the greater contrast in temperature of the air from land to sky and difference in water composition, the snow on Sanghelios was...lighter. Fluffier and softer and more powder-like.

One night, Thel decided to check on the human's quarters to make sure that they were prepared for the cold winter night approaching. He approached the sliding door and gave two soft raps to the wood.
"Doctor?"

"Oh, Arbiter, come in!"

Thel pulled the door to the side and entered the room, closing the door quietly behind him. When he turned around, he paused in confusion. In the corner was a cone shaped tree adorned with sparkling white lights, red ribbons, warm colored glittering ornaments, and a silver star on the top of it. There was a red decorated mat around the base of the tree. On the walls and in pots were red flowers with ribbon, and scattered around the area were

boxes wrapped up in gorgeous paper.

"What is all of this?" Thel inquired, his eyes wide with wonder and curiosity.

Doctor Aliza M. Belle was sitting cross legged on her cot, taping together another box with the beautiful paper. "We received shipments from family on Earth." Her dark hair was tied up in a french braid as usual and she wore a casual dark gray T-shirt with faded blue jeans.

"But...what is this?" Thel approached the tree, feeling the tips of the branches with his finger tips.

"It's a Christmas tree." She smiled.

"...Christmas?"

Aliza looked up from her work. "It's a holiday we celebrate on Earth."

Thel put his hands behind his back and enveloped one fist in the other. "Hmâ€| and what do you do for this holiday?"

She looked back down at her present and pulled one edge of the paper over the box. "It's a holiday where we bring friends and family together. Before Christmas Day, we all put presents under the tree from others, and on December the 25th, we all sit together and open each other's gifts."

Thel nodded thoughtfully. "What is special of the 25th of December?"

"Christmas is technically a Christian holiday, meant to mark the birth of Jesus. Not every human celebrates it."

Thel had heard of this religion before. "Doctor, are you not an atheist?"

"I am."

"Then why celebrate a Christian holiday?"

She shrugged, "It reminds me of home."

Understandable.

Thel sat down on one of the mats on the floor. "What more can you tell me about this holiday?"

And so, Aliza told Thel everything she knew about Christmas; about the legend they tell their children; of Santa Claus, the little elves who work in his workshop, the reindeer, the magical sleigh, and how he goes down chimneys of every single house giving presents to all; about the element of wonder and gratitude and happiness that comes with it. She told him about the Christmas trees, the Christmas dinner and the Christmas music.

Thel sat quietly and listened, smiling at the ridiculousness of a fat man squeezing down chimneys all over the world. However, he found the

holiday quiteâ€| enchanting. Magical, almost.

"Alizaâ€| what if we were to bring Christmas to 'Vadam Keep on December the 25th?"

She gave him a wide stare, "I beg your pardon?"

Thel smiled, "What if we were to bring this holiday here?"

"Why?"

"We have introduced many of our traditions to you. How about you introduce this holiday to us? It is obviously important to humans."

"I meanâ€| I suppose we couldâ€| but, would the Sangheiliâ€| like it?"

"I do not see why not. I feel that it could bring our races even closer together, unify it even more so."

"Wellâ€| alright."

"Will you help us to make preparations?"

Aliza smiled, "I would be more than honored."

* * *

><p>"You did WHAT?" Kalika swiveled around so fast.<p>

"She is not bad at all." Thel stressed.

"Why would you invite my mother?" She opened her palms at her sides in exasperation.

"It is what the holiday is all about! Bringing family and friends together."

"By the gods, I do not have time for this." She turned around and stormed down the hall, her armored cape billowing fast behind her.

The Arbiter sighed, "She is not the only one."

She halted and turned, "Who else did you invite?"

Thel squinted one eye a little, "John."

"The Demon?!"

"He is a dear friend now, Kalika-"

"Absolutely not! We have enough human filth to stink up the place already! No more! Who else?!"

"R'tas."

Kalika covered her face with both of her hands. "Ohhh gods!" There

was a moment of silence before she spoke again, "Who else?"

"Ar'sen, Sor, Fuc, Sergeant Johnson, Lord Hood, and Doctors Facilier and Anderson."

Kalika was very still and very silent. "Ughâ€|"

"My lady, I will handle it. I promise." He approached her and gently touched her arms. "I will take care of everything."

She pulled away from him, "You certainly will. I will take no part in this."

"Surely, you will be present."

Kalika sighed, "I have a meeting with the other wives. I do not have time for this. We will discuss this later."

She parted from him and turned away down the hall. The shadows from the pillars covered her until she passed into pools of sunlight from outside, giving her skin a beautiful silver-blue color.

"My lady?"

She stopped and turned her head.

"You look lovely today."

Was that a smile? He couldn't tell because she turned back around too soon.

* * *

><p>That night, Kalika woke. Something was outside of her bedroom door. Looking over her shoulder, Thel was behind her, his arm draped over her waist, sound asleep. She looked toward the door on the opposite side of the room. There was a glowing blue light seeping under the cracks of the door. She gently lifted Thel's arm off of her and silently stepped onto the cold stone floor. She left the room and shut it behind her. Looking out into the darkness of the hallway, the blue light was disappearing down a separate corridor. She followed it, her hands hovering over her thighs where her trusty swords were hidden under her pale night robe.<p>

She caught a glimpse of the light toward the end of the hallway once more. Where was it leading her? She knew that it could most definitely be a trap, but she didn'tâ€| feel like it was a trap. Did that make sense?

The light had stopped moving. It was overlooking the courtyard from the second floor. Kalika turned the corner.

Her breath caught. Before her was a shimmering image of a little girl. A projection? An AI? But it didn't look digitally projected. It looked so real.. like an ethereal spirit. It looked like Ila.

The young one was solemnly gazing out into the white blankets of snow.

Perhaps too many years of guilt and regret had driven her crazy, but

here stood her first daughter, little Ila. She was about to walk away and shake it all off, but then Ila turned and looked directly at her. Kalika remained stiff and unresponsive, but her mind was exploding with questions.

Ila seemed to have read her mind, because she said, "I am not Ila."

"Then what are you?"

"I am the ghost of Christmas past."

Kalika rolled her eyes and looked down the hallways. "Where are you, humans? This will not work."

No one responded. Nothing moved. Not-Ila smiled, "I am here to bring you back."

"Fuck off." Kalika snarled and turned to walk away. The hallway shimmered in a blue light. Everything faded away. For a moment, Kalika panicked and spun around. There was the ghost, but the world around them changed.

"65 years in the past." Ila said.

They were in a courtyard not unlike the courtyard in 'Vadam keep, but this courtyard was definitely in a different place. It was much more regal and the stone was made of a white substance rather than the gold of 'Vadam.

"How are you doing this?" Kalika's eyes were wide with wonder as she looked upon the keep. She could touch it with her fingers and it all felt so real. There was no dust on the cool, smooth surface of the pillar.

"Kalika Moram, get back here!" A shrill voice shrieked down the hallway.

Again, Kalika's eyes widened as she turned down the hall.

Sprinting down the hall was four-cycle old little Kalika. She was very different. Her eyes seemed a little too big for her head. Her skin was a dark charcoal color, and her eyes were a heavenly green. She had beautiful light freckles that accented her eyes. Little Kalika leapt up into the air and down into the courtyard, landing like a feline and diving into one of the bushes.

A tall Sangheili dressed very regally stormed into the room after her. Generations of selected breeding had made her very, very beautiful. Her skin was dark red, but her eyes were a brilliant, fiery orange. Her robe fell with golden strands all around her long legs and hugged her curvy frame. Z'tora Moram, Kalika's mother, wore a scowl on her handsome face as she squinted into the courtyard. "You will go to the Priestesses with grace and honor!"

Little Kalika remained silent, shivering with rage and fear in the thorny bush.

The scene faded just as Z'tora stormed out.

Then they were in a white room. A prison room of some kind. Kalika was balled up in a corner, her head tucked under her arms. She couldn't have been older than eight cycles. Her mother was kneeling beside her, her skin swollen with bruises, and her cheeks stained with tears. She was holding a strange needle, which she stuck into Kalika's neck.

Immediately, Kalika's skin erupted into a vibrant blue color. Kalika began to scream and cry in pain, clutching at her neck and tearing away from her sobbing mother. The blue color blossomed from the spot where Z'tora had stuck her and overtook the black of her skin like some infection. Kalika's eyes shot open as vibrant icy blue colors shot out from her pupils and covered the green of her iris.

The scene faded. There was older Kalika, maybe twenty cycles now with her normal blue skin, training in the great halls of the Priestess Academy. She was bleeding and bruised all over, fallen on the floor. She was surrounded by other Priestesses, who were holding tiny poles with miniscule needles on the ends of them. They were stabbing her, all over her body, over and over again. One Priestess stood to the side, a much older looking Sangheili. "Yes, Kalika. Just lay there... and let them stab you to death." Her accent was different, and her voice even sounded old. "That will get you out of any desperate situation." This Sangheili had pure white, although wrinkled skin, and was very, very tall. She had small black eyes that gazed with dullness onto Kalika's broken body. "You are nothing that you believed you would be." She said.

"Head Priestess Y'lana." Kalika remembered.

Y'lana approached Kalika and put up her hand to signal the other Priestesses to stop. She crouched down and grabbed the scruff of younger Kalika's neck, yanking her up. Kalika gasped and shivered with pain as Y'lana leaned down close, very close and spat into her ear, whispering, "You are nothing that you believed you would be. You are not this body. You are not this mind. You are not Kalika. You are more than that. You are beyond Kalika Moram, you are this soul and this spirit. THIS (she dug her nails deeper into Kalika's skin) body is a vehicle. THIS (she shook her violently) mind is a tool. THESE thoughts are not yours. What you are thinking? No, that is not you, but your mind. So what is pain? PAIN, THIS PAIN (she hissed)... this pain is an illusion. See past it, Kalika. See past the illusion."

Kalika growled and slammed her fist into the ground. But the pain felt so real. It made her want to claw her eyes out of their sockets. It made her want to die and give up.

"NO!" Y'lana roared and slammed Kalika's head hard down into the rug, purple with Kalika's blood. "Do not subcumb to your mind! SEE PAST IT! PAIN, THIS pain is not real. It is a response from your mind. That is all."

Kalika bore her teeth and curled her lips, panting and squinting into the rug. _Timeâ€| timeâ€|_ time slowed down.

Hhhhhhâ€|.hhhhhhhâ€|. Her rattling breath. The sunlight poured in through a window, its rays shimmering and dancing in golden warmth against her skin. Y'lana's black eyes were looking fiercely into her own, searching her soul and hearts. Her robe shuffled loudly as she

moved, slamming her head again into the floor. She felt the impact, but there was no pain. The tiny holes aching in her body were felt, but there was no pain. _Hhhhhhhhhâ€|.hhhhhhhâ€|.._ Kalika's fist clenched. She swung around with such speed that Y'lana fumbled. Kalika shot up onto her feet, kicked Y'lana hard in the shin, snatched a needle-pole by its head, swung it around, stomped hard into Y'lana's stomach, pinned her there, and pointed the needle directly at Y'lana's neck.

Immediately, the other Priestesses all pointed their poles at Kalika's neck.

"Wait!" Y'lana gasped, holding up her hand. That was the first time that Kalika had ever seen Y'lana smile. "That was it, Kalikaâ€| that was seeing past the mind...seeing past painâ€| and coming to peace with yourself."

The scene faded. Now, they were back at 'Vadam keep. The light outside was beginning to dim. Dusk. The two suns were already settling behind the crests of the mountains. Kalika, as the new Lady of the Keep, had been doing paperwork all day. ALL DAY. Her temporary mentor had instructed her to work until the suns disappeared. A part of one of the suns had set, so technically, the suns had disappeared and she was done. In all honesty, she was just eager to be with her new husband. She sprung from her chair and took her sparring staff out of the corner of the room. She barged out of the room and skipped briskly through the hallways. One of the elder's wives, her "mentor", gasped at her, "Kalika, that is not how a Lady of Vadam keep behaves! Who do you think you are?" Kalika only laughed and playfully tugged at the wife's chin as she ran by. The wife called angrily after her, but she didn't care. She was on her way to be with her best friend and lover.

Off flew her robe, under which her training gear was already on. She had been waiting for this all day. She ran toward the window at the end of the hall of the second floor. She leapt into the air and out of the keep and went sailing through the air. She made a perfect landing in the grass, and rolled to release the energy of her impact. "Good evening, Do'ran!" She called to the guard, who respectfully bowed his head to her with a chuckle.

"Good evening, milady."

"Lovely weather!" She called and ran toward the training grounds down the hill. She slowed to a stop at the entrance of the pavilion, and there at the end of the building, was Thel.

1, 2, 3, 4.

1, 2, 3, 4.

He rhythmically hit the wooden dummy over and over again, controlling his every breath and every single movement, putting as much power and speed as he could into his swings. Sweat dripped from his forehead down his bare brown skin and onto the stone floor. Red sunlight shone in through gigantic windows, but his senses were alert. He was not to be distracted by the vista outside.

1, 2, 3, 4.

1, 2, 3, 4.

Her hearts fluttered with excitement in her chest. She stayed at a distance to observe him...gods, she knew that there was more to him than just his incredible muscles, but damn... She had to hand it to him. After observing how perfect his stance was and graceful his form, she sucked in a breath, smiled, and approached him. "You know..." She called playfully, "...a post is hardly a worthy sparring opponent."

He snapped up into a standing position, and smiled at the sight of the beautiful woman standing in front of him, her skin gold in the light accented by her training gear...despite his hearts already beating at the pace of a drum, she still managed to make it pick up the pace. He went over to her with a huge smile on his face and put his arms around her, pulling her to him and bringing his snout to hers.

"They may not make good opponents, but they are wonderful targets."

"Hm... How about...a moving target? A target that hits back?" She tapped his sweaty chest playfully with her staff.

"Well...that was the plan, my love." He walked back a few paces, picked up his sparring stick and held it in a ready position, giving her a sly look, daring her to come over and take the first move. "Your start, my dear."

"Hah!" She cried. She barely gave him a millisecond to set his stance before she lunged forward with her staff and aimed to swat him in the chest.

He quickly moved the staff into a vertical position, blocking her blow with the middle of the staff held between his hands. He breathed in, pushed back her staff, and swung the lower end of his own staff to hit her in the back, though momentarily he exposed his own.

She cross-stepped to his side, swinging her staff expertly on the side opposite to him and ducking her body down low. Where she lacked in strength and endurance, she made up for in agility and speed. As he moved to strike her, she crouched, spun her staff above her head and managed to pop him twice in the back. Then she rolled backwards over her shoulders into a defensive crouched stance with a playful smile dancing across her mandibles. "Come on, love. I know you can do better than that."

He was disappointed that that had not worked. He had been working on it and could still not make it work. "You know, maybe you should be the one headed to High Charity to join the Covenant." He said with an air of snark. He turned his back to her, before bolting around and unleashing a flurry of hits, the exact moves that he was practicing before she came along. He lightly tapped her abs and smiled that that one got through.

Kalika expected as much when he turned, but she was not ready for the speed he came at her with. She put her staff perpendicular to his to block his many attacks, but miscalculated his last strike to her abdomen. "I would follow you if I could. You know this much." He exposed himself in this attack, and she took this chance to lean to

the side and swing her leg at his open waist.

Her unexpected swing caught the young Sangheili off guard, and she made contact. He tensed his abs and held her leg in place and leaned forward causing them both to fall down, with him laying on top of her, her legs around him.

"I know you would. You would personally take on all who oppose the Covenant by yourself" He said, smiling at the thought of it. Her warrior spirit was not to be contained.

Kalika burst into laughter as they both tumbled to the ground. He was much too heavy to continue the momentum, and so she pressed the bottom of her feet to his belly, just to give him distance, grabbed his lower mandibles, and swung his head to her right. As he rolled left, she snatched her staff off of the floor beside her with both hands, straddled him, and put her staff against his throat. "But not without my future-Supreme-Commander to lead me."

She knew that such a promotion was unlikely, but she had faith in him. He was excellent in combat, but his true strength was his strategic decision making. He could take one look at an opponent and measure his advantages and disadvantages, and he would use his smarts to win a battle. While he wasn't as big or intimidating as most other Sangheili of the Covenant, he had the air of authority and the presence of a leader. She knew that he could do it if he set his mind to it. And so, she would tease and encourage the position to him at times like these to him even if he didn't feel worthy for the job.

He held her staff in his hands as she placed it on his throat. He smiled up at her words, "That is incredibly unlikely...but one day, when I am a shipmaster, I will come home and bring you with me. And I will try...who knows, maybe I will." He used this distraction to grapple her, and with his newfound leverage, thrust his hips in the air, throwing her over his shoulder and following.

"You never do like having me on top, do you?" he inquired slyly as she spun around behind him.

When his back was turned, she charged silently. Better give him some aerobatic training. She jumped up and tackled him hard from behind, locking his throat with one arm, the other holding her staff around his waist. "Why don't you try it on for size?" She whispered back into his ear.

"As you wish, my love." His heart beat faster, and he quickly inhaled before pushing her off of him and rolling away. He walked away from her to get space between them, and again stood ready...he was going to try something different.

She danced away and playfully twirled her staff and beckoned him toward her.

He remained focused, "Your turn, love. I won't follow unless you give me a reason."

She frowned and stood up, relaxing from her stance. "What a pitiful excuse for a warrior." And with that, she swung her arm back and threw her staff with its point at his head like a javelin. Then she

charged him. If he failed to block the staff, he'd get hit hard in the head. If he did block it, he left himself exposed to Kalika's flying kick to his chest.

Thel side-stepped very quickly and laughed as the staff flew past him, followed by Kalika tumbling through the air. "If I am a pitiful excuse for a warrior, you should see my wife. She just limited herself to two options." He used a tone that was not quite mocking, but still offensive.

She landed directly next to him. As he spoke, she crouched slightly, swung her leg to the back of his knees, and slammed him hard in the chest with her palm, sending him hard into the ground. She knelt down next to him, grabbed his throat in one hand and the other rose up in a fist to as if she were going to punch him. "Stop talking smack and focus. This is the second time that I have pinned you." She said and playfully "booped" his nose with hers. Then she released him and skipped away, calling, "Again!"

"I thought it was me training you. I was thinking you wanted me to go easy on you." He smiled as he stood.

She gave him a very knowing look. "You of all people should know that I am not one to go 'easy' on." She swept her staff off on the floor, turned, and leaned on it with her wrists resting on the top of the staff. "I thought that we were training each other." She said with an enthusiastic smile.

Then he charged. His legs pumped fast behind him, his fists clenched and his mandibles parted in a battle cry.

She readied herself for his attack. Her staff was pointed toward him, her stance low and ready. She exhaled... letting her mind become buzz in the background. She inhaled...and closed her eyes. Time slowed as she became aware of the world. There was the wind, shaking the trees outside of the pavilion... There was the hush of grass...the dust, grainy, in between her toes...there was Thel's footsteps, thudding on the ground...closer... Closer. All was at peace. She was not waiting or anticipating... only aware. And then she exhaled sharply as her eyes opened. Her pupils narrowed, her eyes silvery blue in the sun, as time seemed to speed back up. Thel was upon her. Her muscles tensed, ready for impact. She threw her staff to the ground and moved forward. She spread her arms out, stepping back as Thel charged into her. She pulled him close to her and hugged him tightly. Nothing more. She exhaled and smiled, hugging him so close to her. "My love..." She nuzzled her nose against his neck, "My protector...my hearts..." She sighed and held him close.

He...did not expect that. He barely had time to stop himself from running her over. He brought his breath back down and relaxed, bringing his arms around her waist...before thinking of what she could do. He quickly snapped out of it and slipped her legs out from under her, pinning her, but in a more romantic way, his golden eyes staring into her blue. "You almost had me there, my love." He brought his snout to her neck and lightly drug the tips of his mandibles up to her cheek.

She lay there and closed her eyes, smiling at his touch. Then she opened them to gaze into Thel's. She sighed and said, "You've had me for a very long time." She kissed him gently on the muzzle, and

wrapped her arms around his neck. She didn't want him to leave for some stupid war. She knew it was what he wanted for his honor; his duty to his keep, but inside, it tore her apart. She never said it aloud, but she expressed it with her eyes and her hands and her hearts.

The scene faded. Now she was tearing through the woods, branches whipping at her face, and there was Ila's body, and her scream echoed loudly through the forest.

Then she was back in 'Vadam keep, and Ila was gone. No spirit. Just the hallway overlooking the courtyard.

* * *

><p>Today was going to be the best day ever! Wanna know why? Because snow, that's why!<p>

Valina came running down the steps of the keep in her fuzzy doarmir cloak. The'za was towering behind her in her heavy cloak and armor. Valina ran with a squeal toward the white blanket at the bottom of the stairs. Just before she reached it, she stopped. She crouched down and stared at the beautiful white crystals. Her breath condensed into a silvery mist that unfurled from her mandibles, and she giggled with happiness. Her bright eyes were wide and curious as she placed her gloved hand into the snow.

The'za stepped around her and into the barren white ground. Valina looked up and jumped up to follow her only to fumble forward and disappear under a layer of snow. The'za smiled as little Valina jumped back up again with a squeal and yelled, "Cold!"

The'za reached down to pick up her little sister, now four years of age, and nuzzled her cheek to give her warmth. Valina purred with pleasure, but not before wriggling in her arms. "Put me bwak in the s-snow, pwease!"

She obliged and set her down. The snow went all the way up to Valina's waist. She giggled and shoved her way through, making herself a little pathway until she made two big loops. Then she would run, spreading her arms out as if she had wings and jumping. She would jump and laugh forever until after two minutes she got tired and flopped down into the snow.

The'za shook her head and sat down with her.

Valina looked up into the grey sky. The clouds weren't exactly dark, but they were thick and churned against one another. Was thatâ€|?

A snowflake plopped right on to Valina's muzzle, for which she giggled. Then another on her nose. The'za lay down next to her, looking up into the clouds and also enjoying the glittering crystals that fell from them.

"The'za?" Valina asked.

The'za turned her head to acknowledge her.

"How come you dwo not like to twalk much?

The'za paused and moved her eyes around in a thinking manner. Then, in her deep voice, she said, "I do like to talk. But most times, I find that there is too much talk and not enough listening."

Valina nodded, "I agree. Sometimes, Rius talks too much."

"Rius is a Pheru, Valina."

"...Oh yeah, wellâ€| wellâ€| Thesa talks a lot."

The'za laughed.

And then something smacked her on top of her head.

The'za flinched and sat up. Snow slipped down her face. She whirled around to look at her attacker.

There, Crea was leaning on a pillar supporting 'Vadam keep. Her arms were crossed and she looked around innocently.

The'za smiled as Valina burst into a fit of giggles. In a blur, The'za scooped up snow, compacted it in her palm and tossed it directly at Crea's head. She ducked, and instead, it exploded into powder on Lakei's head.

"Hey!" He yelled and rubbed his cheek. Crea smirked as she ran forward to scoop up more snow with Lakei following close behind. The'za spun around and picked up Valina, who was clearly amused by this little game. The'za ran toward the bare trees as snowballs went flying over her head. The'za set Valina down behind the tree and looked past the trunk.

Some of her other siblings were looking down from the higher floors, most smiling and pointing while others ran down the stairs to join them. Eventually, all of the kids were down in the courtyard, throwing snowballs at everyone and anyone. Lakei and Telin were the most vicious toward each other. Crea seemed to be dominating the entire game, dodging whatever was thrown at her and throwing with accuracy at her opponents. Valina sat on The'za shoulders, laughing and holding on tight to The'za's cloak.

"Gimme!" She would squeal when The'za made a snowball. She threw as hard as she could, but most of the time, the snowball would plummet into the ground rather than hit a target.

Mena and Sena were deadly. One nimbly climbed a tree, while the other twin climbed up and down to supply her with snowballs. They would exchange positions and go around to different trees, nailing their siblings down with accuracy and precision.

The oldest of them all, fresh home from war, the two brothers Ral and Sain, were merciless in their pursuit. Sain would tackle his sisters in a bear hug, teasing them as Ral tickled them. When Sain tackled Netu and Ral charged her, most of the siblings charged and snowballs rained on the two brothers.

Thel chuckled with amusement. Kalika was shaking her head beside him at the archway to the courtyard with a faint smile.

"You should go." Thel said.

Kalika sighed, "No, I will not ruin every good thing that they have."

Pfft!

A snowball whacked her right in the head.

Everything stopped as Kalika slowly turned her head toward the courtyard. Most jaws fell open and all froze in place. Kalika sucked in a breath and slowly approached the steps. Her gaze was cold, unforgiving. "Who threw it?"

All were silent. Thel watched from the archway, wondering if he should intervene. She gradually reached the bottom of the steps. Her armored cloak dug in the snow, creating a thin trail where she walked. Her boots made gentle crunching noises in the snow. "Well?" She asked, eyeing each child in the eye.

"I...I... I didâ€¦"

Kalika's head turned fast toward the tiny voice. Little Voro looked up at her, shivering where he stood. His eyes were to the snow, but he stood straight and true. "I...I threw it."

Her icy eyes bit into his as if she were tearing into his soul. With sudden unexpected movement, a snowball whacked him right in the head and sent him flying into the snow.

All blinked in shock. Even Thel's jaws fell open. Voro shook his head and looked up to his mother, who was smiling gently. He was very uncertain and very surprised. He hadn't expected that at all. Then he too, got up, and tossed one back at her.

She dodged and whacked him with another one.

The snowball war continued.

Thel laughed. A true hearty laugh. He had to put his hand to his belly because it ached. As snowballs whipped this way and that across the courtyard, Thel smiled the biggest smile he had ever smiled inâ€¦| gods know how long. He watched as Kalika flipped and dodged and ran around her children, nailing them with countless snowballs. Her white robe fluttered around her feet and from her arms, and her eyes were alive with happiness.

The scene made him feel a warmth inside, a buzz in his chest that he hadn't felt in a very long time.

This was the best day ever! Valina was having so much fun! She and The'za were the only ones left. Kalika had shot everyone else into the snow, who were too tired to get up. The'za dodged behind a tree, Valina panting on her shoulders. "Gimme one! We have this!" She groped for The'za's hand. Once they both had snowballs, The'za nodded.

They whirled out from behind the tree and Valina tossed.

Pfft! Right onto Mama's chest!

"Ooof!" Kalika gasped and fell to her knees. Valina watched as she fell down into the snow.

The'za and Valina both put their fists into the air as her siblings around her cheered and clapped.

This was the best day ever!

* * *

><p>Today was Christmas Day. With the help of the elders' wives and his older sons, they had managed to create a dinner fit for all. On one end was cooked meat for the humans, on the other, raw meat for other races. In the middle was an enormous arrangement of fruits and vegetable dishes native to Sanghelios, such as Neku fruit, Esthin bark, and Helioskrill egg.<p>

With the help of the humans, they'd managed to decorate 'Vadam keep with large red ribbon, pots filled with "poinsettias," and an enormous glittering Christmas tree in the middle of the Great Hall. The hallways were lit with glowing candles and golden light. Everyone in 'Vadam Keep was dressed up and having a great time. Even Kalika decided to show herself at Thel's side.

Sergeant Johnson was busy having a questionable conversation with an Unggoy. "What's your name, Grunt?"

"Fuc!" The little grunt said merrily.

"Say what?!" Johnson spit.

"Fuc!"

"Your mother named you that?"

Fuc tilted his head, "Mother Fuc?"

"Oh for God's--"

"How are you holding up, Sergeant?" Lord Hood approached with a drink in his hand - a purple red liquid.

"Just socializin' with this Fuc."

Lord Hood scowled, "Johnson, that's highly inappropriate. I apologize for his--"

"No, no, that's his name. Fuc."

Hood blinked, "Pardon?"

The little grunt curled his fist over his chest and beat it twice, "Fuc. Me. Me Fuc. You?"

Johnson cleared his throat. "That's his name, sir."

Fuc nodded happily as Hood gave Johnson an expression of discomfort.

On the other side of the hall, R'tas sat on a bench with John. "How

is it that you are only forty-one years of age? You seem older."

John scratched at his brown-grey beard, "When the UNSC doesn't need me, I'm in cryo sleep."

"How is it that you are here, then?"

"I gotta live a life somehow."

"This is true."

"R'tas?" A familiar voice rumbled to his left.

R'tas looked up to see Arsen, who was standing with a female. "Arsen!" R'tas laughed and stood to hug his old friend. "It has been too long! Who is beautiful young female?" He motioned toward her.

Arsen smiled, "This is my wife, Lai'ya."

R'tas took her hand as she smiled to him, "My lady, you look absolutely breathtaking."

She bowed her head shyly, "A pleasure, R'tas."

"And this here is my good human friend, John."

It was strange, meeting a human who was almost taller than they were. They all shook hands and sat down to discuss how John ever managed basically to live in that armor. It was a very, very, very, very tiresome discussion for John.

Toward the middle of the room, Thel, Kalika, Sor, Dr. Facilier and Dr. Anderson discussed research concerning Sangheili anatomy.

Sor was scratching at his bottom chins, "And how do you propose to get the necessary materials for said study?"

"Well!" Dr. Facilier looked up at the ceiling, "I was actually hoping that I could set up a contract with one of your females for surgery!"

Thel cleared his throat, "Doctor, I do hope you realize that most Sangheili would be very against your proposal."

Dr. Anderson was staring at Kalika with that creepy stare again, that one eye shivering in place like it was impossible to stay still. Did it do that even when he was asleep? No, no, push that thought away. Kalika curled her lips back and bore her teeth at him as she curled up her fist beneath her waist. Anderson looked around briefly before disappearing into the crowd.

Dr. Facilier sighed, "Well, I can always hope. You know who to call if you ever have a live female willing to let me study her innards!" He chuckled. Thel and Sor chuckled nervously and uncertainly with him. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'd like to get a bite to eat!" And he left.

"I apologize, Arbiter, but those two humans make me uneasy." Sor

said.

"Believe me, you are not the only one." Thel sighed.

Kalika rolled her eyes. "Why you invited them in the first place after what happened, I will never understand."

"Kalika, is that you?"

She had been dreading this moment all night. Suck in a deep breath.

"By the gods, it is you!"

And here we go.

Kalika turned around as if she had just noticed her. "Oh, good evening, mother."

"Heavens, it has been many, many cycles!" Z'tora 'Moram hugged Kalika tightly. Thel smiled. He could see where Kalika got her beauty. Z'tora's skin was only slightly wrinkled at the corners of her eyes, but otherwise was perfect. Z'tora turned to Thel and bowed her head, "Arbiter."

"Lady Moram." Thel said.

"How wonderful to see you all, oh!" She hugged Kalika once again. Sor began to chuckle.

After two hours of embarrassing childhood stories; such as the first time Kalika saw a nude male, decided to draw it, putting emphasis on his privates, and showed it around to everyone at Moram keep; (Z'tora, Thel, and Sor thought it was absolutely hilarious) or the time that Kalika beat up one of the boys for spreading a rumor that she was romantically infatuated with him; and how about that time when Kalika lifted up her Pheru's tail and took his temperature with her finger; or how about that time she mooned the entire keep during training when her pants fell down; or that-

"Mother, how about you get some food, hm?" Kalika strained a smile.

"Tsk, when did you become so grumpy all of the time, Kalika?" Her mother pushed on her shoulder. "You used to be one of the happiest little girls, always laughing, always looking for a game to play."

"I am not a child anymore."

"That, you most certainly are not. In fact, I think I do find myself to be a tad bit hungry. I shall return when I have put something in my belly. Goodbye for now!" Z'tora waved, bowed her head to the Arbiter, shook Sor's hand once again, told him what a pleasure it was to meet him, and left.

Sor crossed his arms, "What a remarkable woman."

Thel hooked his arm underneath Kalika's, "Sor, if you would excuse us for a moment."

He nodded, "Of course, Arbiter," and turned away.

Thel led Kalika through the crowd. Many Sangheili stopped to bow their heads to the Arbiter, who returned the bow as he passed by. Kalika leaned in close, "Thel, where are we going?" He did not respond. As they passed through the thickest of the crowd, they could see the younger children playing in the snow under the watch of their older siblings. Thel led her up the grand staircase and up onto the balcony overlooking the courtyard.

It was quiet here, except for the faded ambiance of music, talking, and laughter. The courtyard was alight with golden glows from the candles on the stone, and the snow was glittering silver. Snow drifted lazily on down onto the trees and the grass.

"What are we doing here, Thel?" Kalika hugged her cloak close around her.

Thel wrapped his arm around her and pulled her close. White clouds condensed as they breathed the chilly air. His skin was warm to the touch, and Kalika felt better for it. "I wanted to give you your Christmas present." He said.

"My what?"

Thel stood behind her and in front of her, he held a small box wrapped in beautiful red wrapping paper with a silver ribbon. Kalika slowly lifted her hands to hold it, "What do I do with it?"

"You tear the paper to reveal the gift underneath."

"What is the point of wrapping something when you can just give it to me?" She asked as she began to pick at the paper.

"Because it makes it so much more exciting. Besides, you like destroying things."

Kalika sighed as she finally managed to tear the paper.

She pulled the lid off of the box and she blinked at what was inside. Thel smiled and hugged her waist. "Do you like it?"

Kalika lifted the metal with one hand and let the box fall to the stone floor. She held in her hands a necklace. In the middle was a small sheath for a dagger, adorned with glittering blue and purple jewels. When she withdrew the dagger, she admired the beautiful silver curves of the blade. In it, holes were cut and beautiful swirling designs were engraved in its edge. She gave the blade a quick couple of swings, and as she swung, the dagger made a beautiful ringing sound. Kalika smiled and sheathed the blade. "Thel, it is beautiful."

Thel took the necklace from her hands and tied it around her neck. The dagger hung pointing downward from the middle of the silver chain.

"Not as beautiful as my wife." He said and hugged her again.

Kalika smiled and fiddled with the dagger in her finger tips, her

other arm resting over Thel's. On the opposite end of the courtyard stood the misty, glowing blue spirit of Ila.

"Merry Christmas, Kalika."

20. Log 18

CONSORT

of the

HERETIC

Created by Cyber and Zmori

Edited by ShoopWoop17

/Access Data Logs

Year 2553, August 23rd

Vadam Keep, Sanghelios

10:26 Hours

CONNECTING...

Log 18

Vadam Keep was a sight to behold.

A fortress made of a stone that glistened gold in the light was nestled in the gray bosom of the surrounding mountains, now made green by the spring grass. The building held three tall floors, each supported with thick, rectangular pillars and archways etched with designs and alight with flame from adjacent torches. The entrance to the keep was a large gate that led into a large square garden. The walls on the sides of the garden were open where anyone could walk on the stone and view the red bushes adorned with purple and blue blossoms that shimmered gold. Then, there were three thin openings into the keep itself which led to the Great Hall. The Hall was lined with beams across the ceiling, and every other was draped with the Vadam seal on a dark red flag. A long rug rested on the floor and small tables with lighted candles sat against the walls decorated with tapestries depicting stories of old.

At the very end of the wide hall, a great staircase led down. On the west side, a straight staircase went up and then split in two different directions, each leading to the bedrooms and bathing areas. On the east side of the hall, a large door led to the dining hall. Both staircases were blackened and the stones were uneven; results of the attack.

Thel walked the halls of his home alone, his bare toes brushing the soft grain and dust of the stone beneath him. He looked at the staircase to the west. There, he saw the crumbled structure and began to wonder about how much more of a cost it would be to have the rest of the keep rebuilt. The bottom levels of the keep, which held the armory, were already renovated. The top floor was all that

remained.

Then all that would be left would be to move everyone back in and restore the keep to its former order. Easier said than done, he was told.

He and his wife had been toiling over the old architectural plans of their keep. Kalika found them nearly a month ago in her untouched office, buried among the other neatly stacked and important records, locked away under her desk.

Kalika explained to him that she wanted it to remain similar as possible to the keep it was before the attack. When Thel recommended a longer training ground or suggested that a larger portion of the land be reserved for the farm, she would put up her hand and say something along the lines of, "You needn't worry about it." To which Thel wondered if she even needed him in the room with her.

Who was Kaidon anyway?

He decided not to think on it.

As the days slowly turned to weeks and the weeks into months, Thel focused on turning his ideas and plans and into reality. Although the Servants of Abiding Truth had been driven back thanks to _Infinity_'s intervention, Thel was more concerned about the root of the problem; the other keeps saw him as a traitor for allowing humans to land on their home planet. He had tried to convince the other Kaidon about a year ago that the humans came in peace, but that didn't go too well. There was much protest, especially from a particular Jul 'Mdama. Thel pondered all these months about a plan that would cause the least amount of bloodshed and yet be convincing enough to unite Yermo (**35**).

At this point, he still had nothing. His nose rested in his palms and his elbows on the dark red wood of his desk. His head felt heavy. His robes were tight on his body. He must have gained a significant amount of mass during his 27 years at war, because he could remember when the robes would hang on him. He would have to travel to the nearest town, which would be... let me see...

"You have been squeezing yourself into those robes for the past couple of weeks, Thel, and so I brought home some I thought you might like."

He hadn't heard her open the door. He looked up in surprise and blinked at Kalika. She was looking gorgeous, of course, in a robe made of elegant, translucent, and golden silks that were hiked up in the front and spread out on the floor behind her, allowing flexible movement and appearing graceful all at once. She had always refused the piercings and flashy jewelry the other wives in the house pressured her to wear. "I prefer to be as I am," she would say.

"You had just read my mind, love," Thel said, his cheeks tugging in a soft smile. "Let me see them then."

She entered the room, her robes ruffling as she walked, and laid the bundle she was carrying on his desk. "I thought you would like this dark green. It accents your eyes just fine," she said with unamused eyes and opened it before her for him to see.

He didn't look at the robe, but rather at her and chuckled softly. Her eyes widened at him as she demanded, "What?"

Then he looked down at the robe and pressed the soft cloth in between his fingers, "You care so much, especially for details, and yet you try so hard to pretend you do not."

Kalika snorted, "Not at all. I do, however, care for spending my money efficiently, and therefore, yes, I care, but not for what you think I do care for. Hence, the necessary means to ensure that the robe matches your eyes; it is not to give you pleasure or comfort. We have an understanding at this point, I presume?"

Thel smiled bemusedly at her and rested his chin on his knuckles, "Of course."

"Good." She set the green down and lifted up an ebony black, "This is made of a different material; it's a sort of thin silk called... _imku_, I believe. It should hug your frame quite well and provide you comfort."

Thel smiled again. She ignored him and went through the others. When she had finished, Thel nodded and lifted his head off of his knuckles, "They will all do wonderfully, Kalika. Thank you. That is one less thing to think about."

Kalika nodded and rolled them back up into her arms. She looked down at his empty desk and then confusedly to him again, "What are you doing in here?"

"Thinking."

"Is this about the Servants of Abiding Truth again? Your dream to unite Yermo?"

Thel gave a slight shrug of his wide shoulders, "Perhaps."

Kalika sighed and shook her head, "I wish you would not trouble yourself with things so much greater than you."

To this, Thel laughed, "I do not think those words are to be said by a Sangheili such as yourself."

"I am serious, Thel." Kalika lifted one hip and rested her rear on his desk, causing her robe to cascade off of the edge and brush the rug gently as she shifted her weight. "Perhaps this is not a task for you."

"I am the Arbiter, Kalika." Thel said and looked from the desk to her eyes, "If anyone is to take this task, it is me."

Kalika exhaled abruptly, "If I were Arbiter, I'd blow them all up."

"And that is precisely why you are not Arbiter."

"It is efficient."

"And it is wrong."

"Oh, you are absolutely boring."

Thel's eyes narrowed at her, "And you are absolutely the least diplomatic Sangheili to walk Sanghelios."

Kalika slid off of the desk and said to her husband, "You need to get this off of your mind. Come, I will help you with this later. We must be off to bed."

He sat back in his chair and scratched at his collarbone. He breathed out softly and said with a sudden gruffness in his voice, "Yes, I suppose you are right."

He rose and followed Kalika out of his office and into the hallway. They were toward the back of the keep, which was halfway buried under Kolaar mountain, hence the coolness of the air. As they walked, Thel asked, "Has everything gone back to normal yet?"

Kalika rose her shoulders slightly, "It is hard to say that anything is 'normal' anymore."

"Understandable. When do the elders and their families return?"

"Within the week."

"Hm. And Rius?"

Kalika blinked her eyes impatiently, "He returns with them."

"Very good."

They walked in silence for a long while. Not another soul walked the halls but them. The stone to their right suddenly disappeared and then there were pillars marking every two yards, and between them, the silver fields of grass surrounding the keep, and beyond them, the tall crests and hills, and beyond them, a black sky lit with stars and two bulbous moons. The moonlight turned Kalika's eyes a white silver color and Thel's a stormy gray. Their shadows were dark blue on the floor and the parallel wall that concaved into hallways at certain points. Thel looked out into the night and inhaled the fresh air. It was wonderful to see the familiar skies, canopies, and the keep restored to its former structure.

It was wonderful to be home.

"Thel?" Her voice was a razor slicing through the air.

"Yes, love?"

"I have a question."

"What is it?"

"The...e...e...e...e..."

ERROR. ERROR. ERROR.

Code #RLD397555-n11762274HL

LOSS OF CONNECTION...

SEARCHING...

NEW SOURCE FOUND.

ACCESSING.

* * *

><p>Access Data Logs

Year 2554, April 15th

New Llanelli, Sanghelios

22:47 Hours

CONNECTING...

Avu Med 'Telcam walked with his apprentice by his side down a dimly lit hallway. "I believe our cause is going to be realized soon, Dural."

Unsettled by his teacher's excited energy, young Dural lifted his head and asked, "What makes you say that?"

Avu turned down a narrower hallway and his orange eyes twinkled with a mysterious glow, "Dural, after our attack on Vadam Keep, I was approached by... let us say, a significant figure. I believe this figure is the answer. This will turn the tide."

"Who is he, teacher?" Dural asked curiously. He noticed that Avu's pace had quickened with anticipation, further making Dural nervous.

"A double agent, if you will. An assassin. He has been working with us for quite a while now and has certainly proven his worth through other tasks. I believe you will have much to learn from him, Dural."

A door was coming up fast at the end of the corridor. They came to a stop. Avu swiped his palm over a device beside the door and Dural asked, "Is he going to kill the Arbiter?"

He said this just as the door hissed open. The room was not very big. At the very end of the room sat a black desk with a pair of long legs crossed over it. A Sangheili with curious colored skin sat behind the desk... now that he looked longer, Dural realized it was a female. He blinked curiously as a dazzling smile flashed across her cheeks.

"Yes, I'll kill the Arbiter for you," she said with a warm, dark voice.

"Dural," Avu said and motioned his hand toward her, "Meet our turning point in the war and our double-agent; Lady of Vadam keep; Kalika 'Vadam."

Kalika lifted her legs off of the desk, sat up, and said with a snake-like aspect and venomous enthusiasm, "It is and will be a pleasure serving you."

* * *

><p>Author's Notes

35) Yermo is a continent on which the state of Vadam is located. It is also the name of a plant... and of a city in California.

* * *

><p>*I don't particularly like making comments such as these on my stories for the sake of making CotH more like a narrative story and not a blog, but I feel like I owe some of you an apology. It's been more than half of a year since the last post. I'm not going to pour forth excuses, but I would like to make a point. My life has taken me on... let's say, a rollercoaster at this point. I can't promise chapters within two weeks or a month or give you a deadline. But the the story isn't dead yet. It never will be. Even when I've finished it, I'm going to keep it going. I can promise you that. I can't tell you why this story means as much to me as it does. Maybe it's because I've put so much of myself in my original characters. I see a lot of myself in Kalika, but she's got something I don't that maybe I wish I did have.

But that's what writers do, right?

I just wanted to take this chance to say thank you to those of you who are still reading and have made it this far. And I promise you once more, the story will never be dead. I will write when I can, always.

Thank you so much!

Enjoy the cliffhanger until the next post!

21. Log 19

CONSORT

of the

HERETIC

Created by Cyber and Zmori

Written by Zmori

/Access Data Logs

Year 2553, November 30th

Vadam Keep, Sanghelios

9:23 Hours

CONNECTING...

Log 19

Everything was pretty much back to normal.

The keep had been completely renovated by the time the elders and their families had returned from their remote keeps. Thel had been looking forward to their reunion mostly because one of his favorite friends, Rius, would be returning with them.

He waited behind at the entrance of the keep with a number of children while the rest went ahead. They wanted to be the first to welcome the elders home. Kalika stood by his side and had to reprimand the other children to stand straight, keep their shoulders back, and quit playing. Thel was fully dressed in decorative golden armor that shone brightly in the rising sun, and she in her best silver and blue robes.

Up on the clifftops Lakei and Telin were bickering about spiritual values taking precedence over material necessities. Mena and Sena were giggling over the cutest male they saw in town the other day. (Their conversation somehow turned into how he would prefer one over the other as a mate.) Crea had taken position on the opposite side of the road on a higher cliff, keeping watch. The'za sat quietly next to Valina who sat quivering with excitement. She too, was excited to see her friend Rius.

"I howpe he did nwot get huwt duwing tha fwighting." She said worriedly, rubbing her hands together with anticipation.

The'za took Valina's hands in hers and gave her a reassuring smile.

"Yew awh wight, The'zwa. Eeeeeeee! I will give him a big hwug!" She bounced up and down on her butt. She wrapped her arms around herself, imagining the scene already, squinting her eyes happily.

Crea stood suddenly, "There! The caravans!"

Sure enough, there in the curving, yellow valley were the gentle golden glows of torches despite the gentle dawning of the first sun behind them in the purple mountains of Rolam. Valina jumped up and down excitedly, "Wius! Wius!"

Lakei chuckled, "Come, Valina, dearest, let us go meet them."

"Eeeeeeee! Come on The'zwa!" She grabbed her sister's hand and they went rushing down the rolling hillsides to meet the oncoming caravans. Lakei walked quickly with the other siblings close behind him.

Valina ran as fast as her little legs would carry her with The'za jogging as slow as possible behind her. Her bare feet met the soft red dust of the road and there, just ahead, were the small blurs of the carriages. Gradually, she could see the large decorative, purple drapes that covered the tops of them and the elegant dark wooden wheels that carried them, and the large shaggy doarmir that pulled them.

Thel watched the children descend the cliff from afar and chortled, "I suppose they are here."

Then, he too, could see the carriages surrounded by armed guards. He frowned and wondered aloud to Kalika about the use of carriages rather than ghosts and other more efficient forms of transportation.

"Maybe they were destroyed in battle," she responded.

Thel's upper lip drooped at the thought.

Valina had to stop to catch her breath. She wheezed a little and put her hands on her knees. "Whew!" Then she looked up. Her eyes widened. Her mandibles flared out in an exultant manner, "WIUS!" and took off running again.

The'za smiled as Rius' figure came shooting forward to meet Valina. Rius was a slender black Pheru (**36**) with bright glowing blue-green eyes, long elegant legs, and a single wagging tail with three ends. Thick blue-green lines ran down his spine, neck, and legs. Two blue-green antennae curled out from his head, which were the clearest depiction of his emotions. In this case, they were up and erect with happiness. His tail was lifted and wagging tremendously with excitement as he barreled toward Valina and tackled her into the dusty road.

"Wius! Wius!" Valina laughed. She pawed and scratched at Rius' soft colorful fur. She squealed as his long soft pink tongue licked and licked and licked her face. The'za was close behind and scratched behind his antennae until he too began to whimper and rub his long snout all over her knees.

Lakei, Telin, Mena, Sena and Crea joined the happy reunion with their pet just as the first carriage approached them. Valina hopped up and waved to the elders within. Some looked disapprovingly at the rowdy bunch as the others were charmed by Valina's happy innocence and waved back. The seven siblings waved and shouted many welcomes to the females and children within the other carriages. There were five carriages total, each with a guard at every corner. The siblings helped to escort the carriages to the Keep's entrance. There, the younger children aided in carrying luggage and helping everyone off. The Lady of the Keep had banned the use of slaves long ago, much to the elders' disapproval, because she did not believe in paying credits to have so many more hands than what they already had. "It's the most wasteful system," she would say. "Better to strengthen our childrens' arms and backs with self-sufficiency than strain those with extra-mouths to feed and bodies to give beds." Therefore, all of the younger ones weren't afraid to get their hands dirty.

Unless your name was Thesa.

The oldest daughter stood in a glittering gold and silver robe beside her mother, giving gentle bows to her elders, her almond-shaped eyes glistening with golden beauty, her back straight with dignity, her hands folded daintily before her waist.

"Ah, how lovely you look, as always, Thesa!" An older voice proclaimed. Thesa turned her head gently to look upon Elder Taruk as he approached with his wives trailing behind him. His head was bent

forward, his dark red eyes gentle, his purple robes hanging around his body, and a kind, wrinkled smile twinkling in his eyes.

"Elder Taruk," Thesa bowed her head coolly.

"Lady 'Vadam," Taruk didn't smile so much, but did lower his head to her, who bowed her head to him in return. "Arbiter!" He took a moment to stop and lower his whole upper body below his waist.

"Welcome home, Elder Taruk." The Arbiter said and lowered his head.

"The keep looks splendid, Arbiter. Just as beautiful as it did before the attack."

"You have the Lady to thank for that." Thel smiled with charm.

Kalika cleared her throat and looked toward her daughter, "Thesa, humble yourself and walk Elder Taruk to his room."

Thesa looked up to her mother, her mandibles spread and ready to protest until she received the icy stare she gave her. She blinked her pretty eyelids, cleared her throat, wrung her hands stressfully before placing them under Elder Taruk's arm with an, "Of course."

"What a kind young lady. Thank you," he said as they ascended the steps into the keep.

The other children giggled to themselves until Thesa shot them all a look of death over her shoulder. Voro was fidgeting next to his brothers Oron and Len, who were both cool and calm, dignified looking even as young as they were. Down on the other end of the line, Qatar and Sain were making all of the other brothers laugh and chortle with their dumb jokes. "What's the difference between Weli and a doarmir?"

"One is furry?"

"No, one gets a lot more mates than the other!"

"Pffffffhahahahahahaha!"

"I don't get it!" Naro said. He wasn't the brightest of the group.

As soon as the next family went in, Kalika growled at them to shut them up. Then she sent them all to help the next family.

The day went by quickly. Everyone was moved in a little after the suns were at their highest peaks in the red sky. The guards took their posts, the doarmir were led into the pasture and fed, and Rius was happily following anyone who walked by him. As the families settled back into their rooms, the children were preparing a feast with Kalika supervising. Crea handled cutting up the doarmir meat with precision and skill. Lakei skinned and shaped the Neku fruits, one of the Arbiter's favorites. The others helped clean the great dining table, set it with a giant decorative white cloth, wooden

plates, bowls, cups filled with filtered fresh water from the nearby river, and candles. The'za was in charge of decorating the room with bright, colorful flowers from the gardens. Torches were lit, banners were flown from the beams above, and when raw meat was rolled in the final spices, the Neku fruit powdered with the final sweet sugars, the final flowers adorned in white clays vases, the dining hall's doors were thrust open.

Everyone filed inside, chatting about dull things, like the weather, or politics, or games, or, "Did you hear about that guy who declared to have a duel with a doarmir?"

Actually, that sounded sort of interesting. Voro lifted his head and strained to hear what two elders were talking about from across the table, but Mena and Sena were being obnoxiously loud beside him. But he wanted to hear about the guy that wanted to duel a doarmir.

He looked left. At the head of the table sat the Arbiter, sitting quietly, saying nothing, looking at the empty peels of his Neku fruit as if he were longing for another. Elders yelled across the table stories and old legends of their ancestors. The'za admired her flowers. Thesa admired her nails. The Lady's chair was empty.

He looked right. Rius had his antennae erect, sitting next to Valina, watching and waiting for her to throw a piece of anything on the floor, wagging his tail gently. His twin sisters were flicking Neku fruit pieces at Weli. Poor Weli. He didn't understand why everyone made so much fun of her. Weli was a wife of Elder Taruk. Rumor was that Weli was too ugly for him to mate with her, or she was incapable of having children. Either way, Weli was childless. Voro didn't think she was ugly at all. She was fadingly pretty with big, green eyes and brown skin. She was a little plain, but certainly not ugly.

He was so BORED. He watched Elder Kut demonstrate a sword lunge for his older brothers, who were all obviously pretending to amusedly listen to whatever story he was telling. Mena accidentally elbowed him. Ugh. Sisters.

He looked left. Still nothing going on. He looked right. Nothing new. He looked down at his empty plate. Nobody was looking. He looked left, then right again. Then he slid under the table and crawled on his hands and knees. There was so much space to maneuver in under there until you got to the end of the table where everyone was crowded together. Gods, how was he supposed to get out? Everyone was touching knees and bouncing up and down.

Wait there. A tiny hole in between someone's legs. He hesitated, held a breath, and slowly began to crawl. He was small enough! He could fit! He-

The "someone" crossed their legs and whacked him in the head. Then "someone" screamed and leapt up out of her chair. "He placed his head in between my legs!"

Oh no. Oh no. This went so very wrong so very fast. Voro froze in fear.

Someone different reached under the table, a giant hand grabbed him by the scruff of his neck, and he couldn't move. He was drug out and came face to face with an enraged Elder Taruk. "You did WHAT?"

Voro looked back and forth between the disturbed wife and the furious Taruk, "I- I- I- I- I-"

Elder Taruk held him up and bore his fangs, "You little runt! You think that you are so brilliant? So brave? Humiliating my wife like that?" Then he began to walk with him out of the dining hall, "I will teach you not to behave so crudely!"

Thel only heard the scream, but not what Taruk said to little Voro. Then he watched him carry his son out of the room. He stood quickly from his chair, causing everyone to grow silent, and followed behind, his heavy cloak billowing behind him. "Carry on!" he bellowed.

When he turned the corner, he watched Taruk descend the stairs and throw Voro across the garden outside where it was shrouded in night. He rolled and cried, "I did not mean it, sir!"

"Perhaps you did not know any better. That traitorous female you call 'mother' never taught you anything properly anyway. It is time-"

"Taruk!" Thel bellowed.

The elder turned, "Arbiter! This child has wronged me!"

"How so?" Thel crossed his bulky arms over his chest in the doorway.

Taruk stepped down onto the grass and pointed at Voro accusingly, "He placed his head in between my wife's legs under the table!"

Okay, he wasn't expecting that. His pupils narrowed and his voice lowered deeply, "Voro? Is this true?"

Voro felt so helpless. Would they believe him?

"See how his treacherous jaws quiver?" Taruk spat.

"I-I was trying to leaveâ€¦ I was boredâ€¦ I-I-I went under the table to leaveâ€¦ was crowdedâ€¦ so-so I went for the only gap I saw, and then-then- and then she kicked me and- and then she screamed-"

"LIAR!" Taruk growled.

"Silence, Taruk." Thel said and unfolded his arms. He stepped down the stairs and crouched before Voro, "Are you telling me the truth, little one?"

Voro gulped, stared into the Arbiter's fiery golden orbs, and nodded, "I-I- would never lie before the Arbiter, sir."

Taruk growled in his throat, "He must have some punishment. Leaving during a feast just because he was boredâ€¦ disgracefulâ€¦ if you can even believe this lie."

Thel nodded and stood, "I hardly believe a child of less than six cycles is capable of perverted intentions. Leave him be, Taruk. I will care for his punishment. For now, return to the feast and enjoy

the rest of the night. Care for your wife and express clearly there was a mistake."

Taruk remained silent before bowing before him, proceeding up the wide steps, out of the blue shadow and into the warm yellow glow of the halls.

Then Thel turned to little Voro and helped him up to his feet. "You are a daring little one."

"â€|I am very very sorry sir. I had no intent to-"

"It is quiet alright, Voro. It is all just a misunderstanding. I have had my fair share of those."

"â€|How will I be punished?"

Thel shook his head, "I believe the teasing you will receive from your siblings will suffice. For now, return to your room. Sleep well tonight, Voro."

He couldn't believe he'd gotten off this easy. "Y-y-yes sir. Thank you, Arbiter, sir." And he darted away.

"â€|Voro," Thel called.

He stopped immediately at the entryway. "Yes sir?"

"No more skipping meal times. If I have to suffer through Elder Kut's gods awful stories, you must do so as well. Am I clear?"

Voro smiled and nodded, "Very clear, Arbiter, sir."

Thel watched from the darkness of the garden as he watched his son sprint off toward the stairs to the west. He shook his head amusedly. He reminded him of himself as a young Sangheili.

He felt like someone was watching him. He looked toward the dark windows above him, to the open hallways on either side, and the bushes of the garden. His nostrils flared. "Come out," he said. "If you plan on assassinating me, face me head on."

"Tempting," a warm, silky voice replied.

Thel turned.

Kalika stepped out from behind a tree with her arms crossed on her chest.

The Arbiter made a scoffing noise in his throat, "Why not join us inside?"

"I am not hungry. The night called me outside. And so I am here."

"Oh. What did the night want you for?"

She smirked at his playful remark, "It wanted to refresh my memory."

He stepped forward, his heavy boots crunching on the aged grass, his golden eyes concerned, thoughtful, "Of what?"

She was silent. For the longest time, they just stared into each others' eyes, understanding, and yet not at all. She into his gold, and he into her blue. "It reminded me of how you loved to play music how good at it you were"

He listened, taking another step forward.

"of a song you wrote."

"There were many."

"Yes, but there was one in particular."

"Refresh my memory."

The smile she gave him was almost shy. And then she began to hum a sweet tune. A familiar, sweet, sweet tune that lilted up with a bittersweet melody, and then drew down low with such a warmth that the cold of the night was negligible. She began to sway gently as she moved toward him, her arms still crossed. His eyes were gentle and soft.

Seeing her like this the blue light of the moons reminded him of her sterling beauty; the way her eyes curved into an almond-shape and glittered silver in the moonlight, the way her jaws were so elegantly structured under her curved lip, the alluring way her bare shoulders accented her collarbone, the way her smaller waist flared out into birthing hips, and the way her silvery robe accented that beautiful feature

Then her humming transcended to the words that she could remember.

Apart we'll never be

Together we'll stay

Our love, we'll honor

Mistakes, we'll mend

Almost instinctively, he drew her close. She had to unfold her arms to return the embrace, drawing out the dagger she was hiding from underneath her wrist.

My love, you see

My love lasts only for you

She drew the blade upward as she finished the song

"Arbiter? Is everything alright?" A voice called from inside. Thel moved away to look toward them just as Kalika, with silence and speed, shoved the dagger into its sheath on her thigh underneath her skirt.

"Yes, everything is fine. I am on my way."

He looked back down at Kalika and said, "I remember." He then nuzzled her on her nose and said, "The night should call you out more often."

She chuckled and said, "I will go to the bedroom. Until then, love."

"Until then." He pulled his hands away from hers lovingly, giving her a longing gaze, and then proceeded up the stairs.

Kalika watched after him until his large form disappeared behind the wall of the entryway. She looked up at the dark night sky and the beautiful, twinkling stars swirling around a billion miles away in the blackness. Then, she saw the crouching shadow watching her from the roof of the keep. She nodded toward it, and then made her way up the steps silently.

* * *

><p>Author's Notes

****36****) In Halo history, these creatures were originally owned as pets by prehistoric humans and San Shyuum before they were infected by the Flood. In this fanfiction, they are depicted as very dog-like creatures that are descendants of Pheru untouched by the Flood. When danger is near, or they feel threatened, their fur will turn a bright red color.

* * *

><p>NOTICE: We're looking for an editor! If you're interested, please send me a private message with a sample story! We need someone who is well-read on Halo history, facts, and is willing to do Halo homework with us to make this story as close to canon as possible! Thanks!

22. Log 20

CONSORT

of the

HERETIC

Created by Cyber and Zmori

Written by Zmori, Cyber, and ShoopWoop17

/Access Data Logs

Year 2554, January 5th

Vadam Keep, Sanghelios

4:54 Hours

CONNECTING...

The cold woke her. Kalika had fallen asleep on her desk late last night unexpectedly. She lifted her head and grumbled at the ache in her neck. She refused to acknowledge that she was almost 70 cycles of age. Not because that was an elderly number, (Sangheili could live up to 200 cycles on average), but just because the cycles were spinning by faster and faster. After going through so much, time seemed like something she didn't have very much of. She rubbed at the area where her shoulders met her neck as the other went to rest on her pregnant belly.

She wasâ€¦ thirteen months pregnant at this point? She had about nine more to go. While noticeable, she didn't look as far along as she was. With as much training and combat she'd seen, she would have thought she could sustain the weight without having the terrible ache in her back she was feeling at this moment. She took a deep breath and commanded herself to focus.

Beneath her was the half written page blotted in grey ink and symbols native to the Sangheili language of Yermo. Sangheili paper work was always recorded on extremely thin, translucent sheets of paper which could only be read on a smooth white surface, such as the pad embedded in the wooden desk. The system made it more difficult for spies and thieves to steal and handle important documents. It was also extremely efficient and didn't require so many trees to be cut down.

She was making notes for the construction of a new barn for the doarmir herd. She thought about placing it near the keep, but she worried that the smell and the appearance would take away from the keep's grandeur. Perhaps she could place it further down near the sea where the wind would blow away the smell and it wouldn't be so visible, but then the herd wouldn't have nearly as much grass to eat. She could try somewhere in the middle of the two, but she couldn't think of any areas that wouldn't be awkward. One hill was too steep, the other was directly in front of the keep and would be the first thing any visitors would see, and another was too close to the Helioskrill plains for comfort.

She drug her brush along the sides of her notes, doodling little stick Sangheili, rubbing her forehead. Thel was away at a meeting. He didn't give too many details about it, but she knew it had something to do with taking action against the Servants of Abiding Truth. She had heard a story of how the extremists had strung up someone because they were destroying Forerunner artifacts. She shook her head at the thought. She was raised in the Worship of the Forerunners, trained fiercely to protect those artifacts as well, but even after having so many scriptures drilled into her head, she still found the Servants' actions extreme.

She supposed that she couldn't judge them. She'd done worse; dueled a female over an accidental nudge; jumped head-first into a war to bring her husband home because of her beliefs; pushed her children beyond normal standards to instill Kalika's own ideas of self-discipline. Then again, she thought, those instances were all different. In those cases, she was always in the right.

Kalika set her brush down and observed her artwork. Right. Self-discipline.

She would carry on with the plans later. She would sleep for the next thirty minutes until she had to wake the children for their morning chores. She gathered up her robe and stood, sliding the chair away, pushing it back in with a groan from the wooden floor, and making her way toward the sliding door. She rolled the heavy door into the wall and slid it back behind herself. She turned again to lock it with a special key from a band around her waist. The door was disguised as the rest of the wall, and so from afar she appeared to be picking at a brick.

She wrapped her robe around her and began to walk the narrow halls. Her body carried her down, but her mind had flown away elsewhere to somewhere in the past. A sweet laugh sounded in her head, and there were warm suns sending their last light through the trees. Everything was so beautiful.

"Do not go too far, little bird."

Then the light turned dark and the sweet laugh turned into a terrible scream. Trees scratched at her as she ran. There was blood. So much blood. Screaming.

Kalika stopped in the hallway and looked out into the night from the wide open windows. A guard stood at the end of it, observing her. Her eyes were wide and her fingers clawed into her arms. She looked to him wildly, "Do you hear that?"

He tilted his head in confusion, "Hear what, my lady?"

"The screaming."

"No, my lady."

Her breathing intensified. "Someone is screaming." She hugged her waist and began to hurry toward the stairs. "For gods sakes, someone is screaming!"

The guard listened and heard nothing. His eye ridges furrowed together with concern, "My lady, no one is screaming. Perhaps you should rest." But she kept walking, her robe swaying behind her as she disappeared around the corner. He observed his post before rushing down the stairs with her.

"Lady 'Vadam, please, come back inside." He called as she walked out into the garden. Then she was running. He hoisted his pole arm and followed, "My lady!"

She was sprinting. The night sky churned with dark clouds. The stars and moons were gone. She ran toward the small woods on the east side of the keep. She broke through the branches as they scratched at her body. She didn't care. She could hear her screaming for her, crying and shrieking in pain all around her. The guard fell behind as she tore through a bare path that hadn't been used in many cycles.

Gods, she was fast. He continued to pursue her, calling for her to return. He, too, ignored the long black twigs that snatched at him. Then he saw her standing still. He halted to a stop and asked gently, "Lady 'Vadam?"

She was standing with her back toward him, her hands clenched into fists around her skirt, and her head swiveling left and right. She turned to him with wide eyes, "Where is she?"

"Who?"

Her jaws flared outward, "Was it you? Did you kill her?"

"...no, I haven't killed anyone, my lady."

"Did you take her away from me?" Her voice quivered and her knuckles flared a bright purple color. She was clenching her fists so hard. "Were you the one who-?" Her voice cracked and her chest shuddered with rage.

The guard lowered his weapon to the ground and showed her his hands, "They are clean, my lady. I have killed and taken no one."

Her eyes widened with desperation and anger, "Then where is she? Tell me where she is, or gods help me, I will cut out your jugular and feed it to the pheru."

"I do not know, my lady. Who is 'she'?"

She wasn't breathing. He took a step forward, "My lady?"

She blinked and looked around herself very suddenly, "Where?" She stepped forward and collapsed.

He couldn't catch her in time before her front smashed into the dirt. He gasped and scooped her up. Her head lolled and her eyes were closed. "My lady?" He asked. She was breathing and her hearts were still beating in her chest. Now, he was concerned for her unborn children. Would the fall hurt them? Would he be blamed? What a bizarre situation he found himself in! He did the only thing he could think to do and picked her up in his arms. He left his weapon in the ground and exited the dark woods silently.

He entered the keep and began to think of who he could go to to help her. The other wives perhaps? He had just reached the Kaidon's bedroom when she woke. He paused as her eyes flickered open. Then she woke, startled, and grabbed his shoulder. "Put me down this instant!" she hissed.

"But you had fainted, Lady 'Vadam. Allow me to-"

"It is no matter, you must set me down NOW."

He hesitated before allowing her to stand on her own two feet. She glared up into his eyes as though he were guilty of some heinous crime, "You must never EVER repeat of this incident to anyone. Not even the Arbiter himself. Am I understood?"

"Could he promise that? The Arbiter certainly took precedence over his wife" but her glare commanded him to oblige. "Yes, my lady. Of course."

"Return to your post," she snarled, and without a thank you, she shut herself behind the bedroom door. The guard stood, puzzled, and began to descend the stairs to retrieve his weapon.

* * *

><p>Netu woke up feeling quite amazing. She stretched her arms and spread her mandibles in a long yawn. All of her other sisters were still asleep. The'za's muscular bulk curled up around a single tiny pillow to her right, Thesa lay with her back supported on many pillows across from her, and Valina lay curled up in Netu's bed with her. At first, she was surprised and delighted that she had awoken before their mother had come down to wake them.<p>

Gradually, she began to notice that it was daylight outside. She remained cuddled around Valina as her mind began to process the situation. Why hadn't the Lady come to wake them yet as she did every morning? On no occasion ever had she allowed them to sleep in late.

Something must have been wrong. Her six sisters began to wake shortly after her, and they all yawned and stretched before they too began to wonder aloud. Valina remained curled up in a little ball as she squirmed against Netu. "What twime is it?"

The brothers were already awake in their room, discussing the strange phenomenon. Telin bitterly remarked, "Maybe that cursed Lady finally died of ice growing in her hearts."

Lakei wasn't fond of their mother either, but he also didn't believe in cursing others behind their backs. "Let us enjoy this treat, then, and go back to sleep."

However, the younger brothers didn't want to sleep. They wanted to play! One of the older brothers, Tre', they called him, snarled at them to "get lost." He was a bulky one, but not nearly as tall as the other eldest brothers. He was known for being the "bully" of the brothers and was often found picking on the younger ones. However, when his prideful ego got a little too bloated, brothers of all ages would tease him for his real name; Treya. "It sounds like a girly girl name," the younger ones would say, and out came a roaring Tre' after them as they cackled and ran away.

Eventually, someone did enter the room. "Weli!" the younger ones cried.

"Good morning, everyone!" she declared happily and scooped them all up in a big hug.

"Where is mama?" Len piped.

"She is unavailable right now. Therefore, I am here to help lead you through the chores today!"

"Yaaay!" they all yelled and jumped around excitedly.

"Come along and make your beds. Then, we will collect your sisters," she said.

* * *

><p>It was noon by the time Kalika had left the bedroom.<p>

Her robe was a fallow gold color, like the crisp leaves in the fall, and different translucent silks fell behind her legs, barely touching the ground. It exposed the top of her shoulders and a bit of her upper back, and opened at the front of her thighs to allow much easier movement should she need it. As always, she kept her swords hidden under the robe on each leg. The same translucent silks fell elegantly around her biceps and from her elbows, leaving her forearms bare.

She could seem harmless looking like this, but everyone knew much better. At least, most did.

She walked down the halls of the second floor. Most would question why the keep was so open. It was just inviting an assassination.

Kalika looked up as she walked down the bend of the stairs and toward the front. She tilted her head in confusion and arched her eye ridge slightly in surprise when she noticed none other than Thel 'Vadam coming through the door way.

He looked as handsome as any Sangheili could. His stride was slow and graceful, his posture making him seem twice as powerful, and his head bowed. A long doarmir cloak hung off his right side. Glistening golden eyes stared at her through his helmet and a warm smile tugged at his cheeks at her subtle, yet undeniably surprised expression.

"I thought you were going to a meeting." She said, more as though she were asking a question.

"I thought so as well," he said, his voice deep and resonant. "I received a transmission midway through my journey. It was rescheduledâ€| much to my annoyance. Is everyone awake yet?"

Netu and Crea suddenly came running down the stairs, squealing at the top of their lungs and running past. Netu tripped and accidentally bumped into Kalika's arm, who instantly narrowed her eyes dangerously at her and snapped, "NETU!" before she could answer him.

Netu stopped immediately and stood stiffly. A growl of warning rippled through Kalika's throat, and for a moment, Netu feared punishment.

But she stopped growling and tilted her head slightly, "Disicpline."

Netu couldn't believe her luck and bowed her head, "Yes, my lady," and pounced after Valina and Crea.

Kalika looked back to Thel, "No, I'm afraid the boys are still asleep along with a few of the girls. Do you need them?"

"Not necessarily, I am just wondering." Thel stood with Kalika beside the archway into the hall. His eyeridges suddenly furrowed together, "â€|How is it they are asleep late?" He gave a serious glance toward Kalika. "You have never allowed them to-"

"I had some complications last night and this morning that required attention."

His pupils narrowed and his teeth flashed a bit when he said in a lower tone of voice, "What complications?"

Valina looked up and saw Crea and Netu running toward her. "Netu! Crea!" She smiled and ran to her sisters. Crea lifted Valina off of her feet as Rius pounced around Netu. Rius spread his many jaws and made a scuffing noise in his throat, expressing his happiness as he wagged his three tails. Netu laughed and spread her arms, "I'll race you to the river!"

Before Crea could respond, Netu was off and running on her long nimble legs. Crea set Valina down and pulled on her arm, "Come on, hurry!" And they both charged after Netu. Crea stayed behind with Valina, pulling her along as fast as she could. The tall grass rustled in the wind and the skies were as blue and clear as ever. The two suns rose over the hills in the north, spreading their glorious rays across the lands of Sanghelios.

Kalika looked away from the Arbiter toward the small area of woods in the distance. "I may be punished for saying so, but it seems they-"

"Then do not speak. If you-"

A high pitched scream sounded outside. Kalika's head turned suddenly and her eyes widened as she recognized Netu's scream. Kalika gave a frightened look to Thel, and then was off and running the next instant.

Crea stopped running. She had lifted Valina and had long passed Netu a while ago. She set Valina down and looked around. Netu was gone.

"..Netu?!" She cried and looked around. There was nothing but grass and plains. Netu wailed again. "Valina, stay here!" Crea shouted and pointed at her exact spot.

The older sister ran forward, "Netu, where are you?!" She inhaled sharply and stopped instantly. She found herself staring down a large sink hole. She could barely see Netu through the branches and roots that stuck around the edges. "HELP!" Crea yelled, desperately kneeling by the edge of the hole and hopeless as to how to help her sister.

Valina didn't know what was going on. One second ago, they were racing to the river and the next Crea was yelling to a hole. Slowly she made her way to the hole by Crea and looked down. Valina's eyes widened in horror when she saw her sister at the bottom. She had to help her somehow... so she stuck her arm down in the hole and reached out as far as possible, as though she were only an inch away rather than five yards. "Try and grab my hand," little Valina cried.

"Netu?!" Thel said as Kalika immediately took off running. He followed after her, removing his cloak from his shoulders.

When they arrived at the sinkhole, Kalika pulled Valina and Crea away, pointing, "GET BACK!"

Crea held Valina tightly as they watched their mother and the Kaidon

struggle for a way to help their sister.

Kalika observed the hole, and then Netu at the bottom. "Don't move!" Kalika called down as Thel threw his cloak in. The sink hole could be even deeper and collapse at any moment. Netu reached for the cloak, but there was still a couple of feet of distance apart. Her legs...

Kalika had to calm her frantic breathing. "I'm going in." She said and threw off her own cloak.

"Kalika, don't do anything you don't need to!" Thel said.

She nodded, grabbed the thickest root sticking out of the side of the wall and swung her legs over. She slowly but surely started to make her way down. She pulled and tested each root before she grabbed onto it. She was only at the top when the root she had tested betrayed her and came loose. Kalika reached desperately for something to grab on to, and found herself deeper in the hole. She had caught Thel's cloak and a different root on the side of the wall. She looked down at Netu, who was only about three feet away. Dirt was sliding in from the top and dribbling on her face.

Netu was laying on a bed of webbed roots and branches. One of her legs was lodged in the middle of a tight knob. Kalika let go of the root, trusting Thel's arm better than any of the roots, and reached out to her daughter. The Arbiter ground his teeth together at the pressure.

Netu sobbed, "I cannot move my leg." She tried to pull it out, but it only made her wail again in pain. Kalika was thinking fast. She slid down to the end of the cloak to the point that she could stand on the webs. The cloak was a good eight feet. Kalika pressed her feet on either side of herself and reached for her sword. The blue energy sword sparked to life.

Then she stopped. If she cut the roots, they would sink and the hole would most likely collapse. Kalika's arm was shaking with strain. And she would lose Netu. "Pull me up when I say." Kalika called up and readied her sword.

She expertly swung it along the side of the root that entangled her daughter, leaving it skinny and weak. "Pull, Netu!" She commanded and grabbed her shoulder, pulling her up with all of her might. Netu grunted and broke the root with her bruised and scratched leg, wincing in pain and allowing herself to be pulled up.

"Grab onto the cloak, and whatever you do, do not let go." Kalika said and held Netu up under the shoulder. Netu grabbed the cloak as the roots began to lose their stability and sagged. Kalika released the cloak and pushed her daughter up, "PULL UP NOW!"

Thel pulled up with all his strength (and thanked the gods that he could lift the two of them and still have strength) fighting against the sinkhole, but... almost with too much. They both flew out of the hole and pinned him to the ground. Except there was no Kalika. Only Netu had come out of the hole.

"Kalika?!"

Kalika grabbed for the roots again as Netu was pulled through to the top just as the dirt came collapsing in. Sunlight was blocked by the incoming walls. Kalika's slight claustrophobia kicked in and made her start climbing, her hands pulling at the roots and digging her toes into the soft earth. She looked up as her name was called and got a face full of dirt. Netu was safely out. Now it was time to save herself. She fought for a while against the current, but she was forced to stop and bowed her head, taking in a deep breath as the sink hole collapsed.

Netu blinked and looked up at the Arbiter. Her gray eyes suddenly widened as she realized as well that her mother hadn't made it to the top. Most of the kids weren't too fond of their mother, but Netu suddenly felt a sickening cringe in her stomach at the thought of losing her. She rolled off of the Arbiter's chest and started to fumble toward the sink hole again, but it was expanding fast as it collapsed. "M'LADY!" She started to move toward the churning grassland as it fell in on itself, but her injured legs gave way and she fell to the ground. Her eyes widened at the closed sinkhole.

Two elders came running from the keep, having heard all of the commotion. "What is going on?!" One of them shouted as they approached the Arbiter, who happened to be sprawled out on the ground. The other, equipped with a long spear strapped across his back, grabbed Netu and pulled her away from the sink hole as it stopped expanding.

Kalika's air was running out. She kept her eyes closed and held on tightly to the firm root before her. The dirt thankfully stopped moving, allowing her some movement. Something had scratched her below her eye and across her back, and the wounds were itching like mad. Claustrophobia again seized her body. The pressure of the dirt was excruciating and she finally reached out for another root, desperately looking for something to hold onto and a way out.

"Netu, stay back! Elders, tie your robes to mine and around my leg. I am going in after her."

"Are you mad?" An elder asked.

"It is all I can do," Thel grumbled as he threw off his helmet and other armor pieces, untying his robe.

"She is just another female," said the other.

"You both know that is not true. Now do it!"

Valina stayed back with Crea and watched the scene unfold. When Netu came out and her mother didn't her hearts dropped at the thought of losing her mother. She wasn't like her sisters and brothers who hated Kalika. She had seen another side of her that none of the other kids had seen and the Arbiter seemed to be the only male in the keep who had ever really cared about her mother... Now that she thought about it the kids had at least something similar to the Arbiter... Could it be?

The elders shrugged off their cloaks and their robes. The one with the long spear unsheathed it and lay it across the ground as the other began to tie the robes. He lifted Thel's cloak and added it to the end in a swift knot. He obliged the Arbiter's commands and tied

it around his leg in an expert knot. "Ready when you are, my lord."

The other with the staff readied himself by the edge of the sink hole as it shifted and churned. She was obviously still struggling to the surface, and still alive. He flipped his staff over and aimed the blunt bottom near. "I will pull you out after two minutes." He nodded toward the hole and readied his spear.

The other held on tightly to the long end of the rope of robes and cloaks. It gave them a good 15 feet. He held it near the end and awaited the Arbiter's orders.

"Pull now!" He made sure to miss where Kalika was so that he didn't crush her, and took one more breath before plunging in. He closed his eyes as his body became enveloped in dark red dirt, using his hands to find her in the dark.

Her lungs were on fire. Her body made a desperate attempt for air and instead got a mouthful of dirt and grass. She coughed and clenched her mandibles again, keeping her eyes closed as her movement gradually began to slow. Something shifted greatly beside her, and once more, she could feel herself being sucked back down.

But she felt some one's hand and she instantly reacted. She clamped her hand around his as an overwhelming feeling of relief surged through her desperateness.

The two elders worked together to hold the robes as the Arbiter plunged into the sinkhole. It started to collapse again, but they fought and held the Arbiter up, pulling up on the long rope. For a split second as the soft earth concaved, they could see them both, and instantly, they recognized that now was the time. They both took low stances and pulled them toward the edge.

Kalika saw light briefly, and then the hand pulled her and she went back under. She pulled herself toward the hand, recognizing Thel and tightening her grasp for life as they broke the surface and were pulled up onto the edge. She tried to breathe, but there was something in her throat, and was instead wracked with coughs. She lay there beside Thel, gasping like a fish did for water on the shore. She looked up at him, ignoring the rest of the world for a moment and giving him a look that only he could understand of absolute gratitude.

"Is everyone alright?" One of the elders asked. This was the one with the long spear. Kalika bowed her head, still struggling between a fit of coughs and a battle for air.

"No." She said and looked up at Netu, who was still laying in the grass where she had fallen.

Thel breathed a quick sigh of relief. That was easier than he thought it would be. But just as Kalika spoke, he looked over at Netu and noticed the awful condition of her legs. "Netu?"

Kalika winced as she sat up. Her muscles were sore from clawing at the dirt so much and the climbing. She rolled over on her hands and knees and came up to Netu.

Her legs were dislocated at the hocks where the roots had caught her. Purple blood speckled her skin where she had been cut by the thorns and dirt was smeared along her wounds. Netu looked up at Kalika, who had taken on a very distant and dismal expression.

One of the many benefits of training to become a priestess was learning the many ways of healing the body. Massage and stress relief was one, while healing actual wounds took on a totally advanced level of knowledge. Kalika never completed her training and never became a recognized priestess, but she still took advantage of what she knew.

Kalika stood and slid her arm under Netu's shoulder blades. "Someone hold her legs by the knees and her calves. Do not move any ligaments or joints as we pick her up." She said as she began to tear off a piece of her robe. She wiped away the dirt and mud surrounding her wounds regardless of Netu's outcries.

As he ran over to help Kalika, it hurt his heart to see his daughter in so much pain.

"Netu, you're going to be alright." Regretfully remembering what she couldn't know, he added, "And I do not know much about treating wounds, but I can tell your legs are not broken, so luckily for your honor, you will not need a doctor."

Netu grimaced as the Arbiter knelt down to help her. Kalika looked up at Thel, warning him with a glance at his first sentence, and then focusing again on Netu when he fixed himself with the second.

She slid her other arm under her waist and nodded her head to Thel. She began to lift Netu gently, making sure to keep her legs level with her torso. "We need to get her to a table."-

The other elders suddenly had a feeling of uselessness, and said "Lord Vadam, we will escort the other two back to their quarters. Is there anything else we can help with?"

Thel thought for a moment. "Yes. One, make sure that there is room in on the grand hall table, and two; make sure that they haven't put away breakfast completely."

"Avoid telling the others of what has happened, if you can." Kalika added as she held her daughter up to her chest. She slowly made her way through the tall grass, keeping pace with Thel as the golden grass tickled at her elbows.

They went inside the arched doorway and down the main hall. She stopped in front of the large wooden door that opened into the grand hall, and opened it with her two-toed foot. She held the door open with her hip as she waited for Thel to enter first.

"Stay calm, and take deep breaths. It will hurt, but you will be alright... erm, and, feel much better afterwards," Thel said as they entered, attempting awkwardly to comfort Netu. He helped Kalika lay her on the table and allowed them some room.

"All yours, Kalika."

Each of Netu's cries of pain stabbed Kalika again and again in her

hearts, and her mother's instincts screamed at her to help Netu. On the outside, however, she appeared unaffected by her daughter's pain. Her eye ridges pulled together in concentration as she closed the doors behind her. She turned around and swiftly made her way for the smaller drawers along the bottom of the walls. She pulled stacks of towels out, and then stepped back up to the table. She lifted her daughter gently and flattened towels under her body. She made sure to turn Netu's knees gently and placed the dislocated joints on the rolled up towels. She took another stack of towels and knelt down by the small stream system that flowed in artificial trenches around the perimeter of the room. The water was already filtered from the pools throughout the keep. Kalika dabbed the cream-colored towels into the clear water, and then walked back up the steps to the main table.

She pressed the towel up against the cuts on her legs, and Netu instantly thrashed with a scream, moving her dislocated hocks and releasing another wail of pain. Kalika dropped the towel and grabbed Netu's arm firmly. "Stop moving!" She hissed. Netu continued to sob uncontrollably as her shaking limbs finally began to lie still. Netu whimpered up at the ceiling, refusing to look at Kalika as she went back to the end of the table. She grabbed a smaller dry towel and gently spread Netu's jaws. She pressed the towel in between them, forcing Netu to breathe in through her nose. Netu breathed heavily and rapidly as Kalika returned to the end of the table.

"Thel, hold her arms down." Kalika requested as she readied another wet towel and held her knees down. She needed to clean the dirt off and away from her cuts to avoid infection, but she also needed to stop the swelling in her hocks and get them back into place before that turned all bad too.

"Alright," he replied quietly and gently held both of Netu's wrists. "Netu, you will be alright. This is going to hurt, but at least you will be able to walk, run, and live. You will not have any damage to your body. Trust me. I know how it feels."

Kalika looked up briefly at Thel as he spoke soothing words to her. Netu nodded briskly at him, choking down her sobs, and trying to remain strong for the sake of him. It was a comforting thing, being calmed by the Arbiter, one of the greatest and highest of ranking among them all. She took his word for it and bit down hard on the towel.

Kalika was still staring at Thel, and then after a while, she finally went back to her work. She began to clean and wipe away the dirt and grass. Netu's attempts to yell and scream were muffled by the towel, and she fought terribly to rise and thrash again, but was held down by the Arbiter's strong hands.

It was clean enough now to buy her enough time. This was going to be the worst of it. Her hocks were swollen slightly and the skin was bulging where the joint was dislocated in both legs. Kalika gripped Netu's gaskin and readjusted her stifle gently. With her other hand, she grabbed directly below her hock, and Netu attempted to thrash again. Kalika needed to do this quickly, but she had to make sure that she would do this right.

Kalika gripped firmly and shoved the joint downward into its proper socket. Netu's body tried to rise off of the table again. She had no

more ability to scream and her face was contorted with horrible pain. There was still one more leg to go. She felt the strong urge to look away from the sight of her daughter in so much pain, but her duty came first.

She wanted to say something to help her, but she knew that she was pushing the limits already in just helping her daughter. Kalika readjusted the other leg as Netu found the ability to whimper and wince again. She allowed Netu a small break and began to wipe and clean at the cuts again. After a while, Kalika suddenly grabbed Netu's other hock and gaskin, shoving it, too, back into place. Netu fought the Arbiter's grasp desperately, trying to scream, trying to fight and thrash at the horrible sensation that burned her legs. She felt like she was on fire.

Kalika took a deep breath through her nose as she released her hocks and stepped back for a moment. Netu fell back onto the table and spat the towel from her jaws, gasping and sobbing in terrible pain. Kalika began to clean the wounds again, sitting on the edge of the table. "You will not be able to walk for several months. You are to stay in bed until then."

Netu began to sob again, not in pain, but in longing. She didn't want to miss out in playing with her siblings. She loved to run and play... how would Valina survive their mother in all of her innocence without Netu's help? Could she trust Crea?

Kalika didn't seem to care for Netu's pain, "You will have to recover alone. Your sisters cannot know about this, if they do not already." She continued to drag the wet towel over the purple cuts in her dark skin, skin she had so obviously inherited from her father. Netu didn't seem to care for the pain anymore, except for the pain in her hearts. Recovering alone in a room for months didn't sound pleasant at all. Netu had seen recovering rooms, and she promised herself that she would want nothing to do with them.

Kalika noticed the hocks were swelling again. She placed pressure on them, much to Netu's discomfort. Kalika pulled warm towels around her hocks, supporting the bones and calming the nerves.

"...Can I see Valina?" Netu asked throatily through her tears.

Kalika looked up at Netu as she began to clean the cuts again. "No." She said flatly. She couldn't risk allowing Valina to get the wrong idea. From what it seemed, Valina seemed to be having suspicions already about who her father was. They were in the danger zone, and Kalika couldn't allow her to see Netu as she was now. There was too much at risk.

"...I can do the rest, my lord." Kalika said stiffly, finishing her cleaning as Netu stared sadly up at the beams stretching across the ceiling.

It was evening by the time Kalika had finished. Purple blood stained many of the towels. Netu had passed out from fatigue a few minutes ago and her cuts finally stopped stinging her so much. Her legs throbbed painfully, but she was far more tired.

Kalika couldn't remember a time when she had felt so weak. She pulled

the towel away finally and sat there for a while. Her eyes began to soften to express her weariness and her shoulders sagged slightly. She wiped her eyes with her palms and exhaled shakily. She observed the wide wounds that were raked across Netu's legs. She needed to close those up to.

She slowly slid off of the table, walking down the steps to the drawers to look for dressings. She pulled the hidden rolls of woven bandages out from one of the smaller cabinets and turned around again. She sat up on the table, shifting her robe and allowing it to drape over the edge, and pulled Netu's legs up onto her lap ever so gently. Kalika pulled the towels away and spit a bit on the bandages. She began to wrap the golden-green dressings around her legs, over her cuts, and thickly around her hocks to avoid movement.

When she was done, Netu was asleep, and her entire lower leg was cleaned and supported in bandages made of a special plant, and her hocks were set back into place.

The next thing she knew, Kalika found herself cleaning the rest of Netu's body. She gently wiped away the dirt on her arms, stroking the wet towel over her eyes and her muzzle. Kalika's mind was elsewhere, and her eyes had hardened in concentration. Her back was stiff, and her shoulders were pulled back again.

The worst of it was over. All there was left to do was to change her clothes and get her to the recovery room. Kalika was in no hurry. They would have to wait until night fall when the rest of the children and elders were in bed again.

Finally, Kalika sat up, setting the towel in the purple pile behind her. She looked down at her sleeping daughter. Netu was a young and beautiful young girl who would grow into a fine woman. She had inherited the fine dark brown skin of her father and the freckles of her mother, except they were a soft gold color, like Kalika had before she was...

"I am sorry." Kalika said gently to her, though she knew that Netu couldn't hear her. She looked tiredly up at Thel, wishing that she could express her gratitude for him, but her stomach suddenly clenched harshly. Kalika began to cough as a burning sensation stung her throat and she snatched up a bloodied towel. She held it over her muzzle just as bright purple blood thickly splattered the cloth.

Thel watched with sad eyes, unknowing, yet understanding there was nothing he could do. "Let me know when we will move her."

Kalika pulled the cloth away and look up at Thel, "We can do it now." As if nothing had happened, she stood and slid her arms under Netu's legs gently, waiting for Thel to get her upper torso.

They cued each other with the nod of their heads to lift her and headed off.

They entered the recovery room silently. Outside the window, the noon suns cast their rays in all sorts of different directions as thick clouds began to gather overhead. The red skies stretched out as far as the eye could see, and the tall mountainous hills stuck up from the ground, its lands green with the skillful terraced farming.

Rivers cut and spider-webbed across the grassy plains, and silvery sand stretched out by the beaches to the east. At least she had a nice view.

The long room had many beds lined up against the walls. Each bed was a thick purple cotton mattress with several columns of pillows at the top to support who ever needed their head uplifted.

Kalika carried Netu with Thel to the end, where she knew Netu would appreciate the view. The courtyard opened up below the window, where gardens and flowers bloomed along the stone walkways. It was a truly beautiful keep and was well taken care of.

Kalika lay Netu down on the furthest cot, and gently supported her head with the pillows. Netu still slept peacefully and quietly with her hands folded over her belly. Kalika sat up and started to walk away again. Thel stared thoughtfully at his sleeping daughter before following.

Kalika closed the door behind them, and they were alone in the hallway. Her shoulders sagged slightly as she sighed. She rubbed her sore muzzle with her hand and her expression suddenly softened.

Thel watched her. She was thinking.

Before he could ask what it was, his communications lit up at his neck and gave a soft chirp in his ear. He ignored it. She looked up at Thel wearily, "When is this meeting of yours?"

"How did you know?"

"What else could it be?"

He smiled, "They must calling it now. I must be off, then. Good luck, Kalika."

The next thing she knew, she was closing her eyes and pressing her muzzle forward against his, rejuvenating her with enough energy to get her through the rest of the day. Her finger tips brushed along his as he pulled away and walked out of the hall. She stood there for a while in silence, holding her hands before her waist.

"Lady 'Vadam?" Someone called from behind her.

Kalika turned around and looked up at one of the wives of the elders. Elin blinked at her in surprise.

Kalika realized then that she was still smiling.

"Yes?" Kalika asked coldly as her cheeks pulled downward and her eye ridges pulled forward.

"Is... everything alright?" Elin asked softly.

"Why do you ask?"

"...We have not begun the chores yet today. We are very much behind schedule. The children are outside now, training."

Kalika headed off toward the other end of the hallway. "Take the day

off, Elin. We will make up for it tomorrow."

"Y...uh... ehm... yes, my lady." Elin said softly and walked off in the opposite direction.

23. Log 21

CONSORT

of the

HERETIC

Created by Cyber and Zmori

Written by Zmori

/Access Data Logs

Year 2554, January 6th

Vadam Keep, Sanghelios

6:00 Hours

CONNECTING...

Log 21

The silent padding of his Sangheili's feet behind Dural was a comfort. It felt empowering to lead the mission that would silence the Arbiter once and for all, earning an honorable title for himself and for his cause. The black and white armor of his comrades groaned gently with each creeping motion made through the high grass. They couldn't risk being seen by an outlook. At a distance, the careful design of their armor would have made them seem like rocks. Nonetheless, Dural would take every precaution to maintain stealth. He silently rose his fist as they neared the top of the cliff, signaling to his men to come to a halt.

On elbows and knees, he carefully crawled low to the ground on the edge of the high rock. He couldn't help but to smile with enthusiasm and excitement at the golden prize of a keep that lie below.

* * *

><p>"Lower," Lakei heard his mother demand as her staff whacked his thigh. He obliged and lowered his stance. No matter how perfect he felt his stance and form was, the Lady always found something for him to improve on. He went through the check list in his head.<p>

Shoulders back? Check.

Relaxed fingers? Check.

Forming an L with his feet? Check.

Body perpendicular to his opponent? Check.

Aligned neck to spine? Check.

Eye contact? Check.

Steady breath? Check.

Incredible burning sensation in legs from holding this stance for a longer amount of time than necessary all the while dripping sweat from the strain and heat? Check.

Despite all of this checking, the Lady still found something more to correct. Her staff gently lifted his wrist higher. "Your opponent is not on the ground yet. You leave an opening to your head and throat when you allow your hand to fall like that."

Lakei ground his teeth together, "Yes m'lady."

"Aw, looks like Lakei is not as perfect as he thinks he is," Telin said under his breath beside him.

"Silence." Kalika growled and her staff hit him hard beside his head. "Lower your stance as well." Whack! "Lift your chins," Whack! "Set your shoulders back," Whack! "Adjust your feet," Whack! "And straighten your back." Whack! Telin's mandibles tightened into a straight bundle under his head and his eyes widened as his limbs began to turn a faint purple color with spots in the shape of the end of Kalika's staff.

Lakei maintained a straight face so as not to draw her attention, but smiled with delight on the inside.

Meanwhile, the Arbiter watched the training grounds from a balcony above. He laughed a deep, rich laugh in his chest at the sight. Nineteen of the younglings were facing each other, lowered in their stances, arms level and relaxed, legs firm, shoulders lowered, and eye contact maintained. There was supposed to be twenty—ah, yes, Netu is missing. He had nearly forgotten. Kalika had The'za step out and run a five mile trek around the keep to even out the numbers. He watched as Lady 'Vadam walked the two aisles, checking and adjusting these stances. She had to make up for the time lost yesterday. Training for today was double in length. He felt a little sorry for them.

She was harsh on them today. She wouldn't let the slightest imperfection slip past her narrowed, calculating eyes which looked them up and down like a hawk eyeing its prey below. She wore her doarmir leather training gear; two straps crossed over her chest, and three wound tightly together around her waist. Two layers of thicker straps hung from her hips like a skirt, longer in length in the back than the front. Tall boots held one strap in between her toes and wrapped up her legs to her ankles. The dark leather seemed aged and faded in some places, but there was not one crack nor tear in the armor, indicating gentle care over the cycles.

She walked down the lines slowly. The little ones, she didn't give too many exceptions in comparison to the elder children. Her staff bumped and corrected legs and shoulders until she got down to the very end. Voro and Valina were facing each other. She had them paired together because Voro was best of the younglings in his stances, and

Valina seemed to have trouble grasping the concept. Every time Kalika checked on her, her knees were locked straight and ridged.

"How many times must I tell you, Valina?" Valina heard the Lady growl. The staff swept under her and knocked both of her knees out. "The enemy will break your legs. Follow Voro's example."

Valina smiled gaily and piped, "Yes, m'wady!"

The Lady shook her head and turned toward the center of the aisles. She set the staff straight behind her back and took in a deep breath as she bellowed, "White Form! _Krisak_!"

Relaxed fingers hardened into fists.

"_Ula_!"

All partners to the left stepped forth with a fist as all partners to the right stepped back with raised forearms to block it.

"_Sanz_!"

In fluid motions, the partners reversed roles.

"_Dak_!"

Thus, the forms practice commenced. Lady 'Vadam called the numbers in the older Sangheili dialects, as was the custom for practicing the older combat style known as _Heilo_ â€" translated to The Sun's Way. Thel thought on the history of it for a while, watching the graceful, fluid yet firm motions on either side of both aisles. It was the art taught to the Priestesses in honor of their Forerunner gods. Legend tells of a powerful and noble Forerunner called Urjoed, and his lover, Sukost. He could harness the power of the suns, and she the powers of the moons. When war between the gods came, for their families' honors' sakes, the two lovers were forced to fight one another. However, while they would carry on fierce battles with one another, there was something in the forms that would not damage the other. The firmness and power of Urjoed's style became known as _Heilo_, The Sun's Way, and the contrasting fluidity and grace of Sukost's style became known as _Ulasil_, The Moon's Way. When both lovers died, Urjoed was split into the sky above Sanghelios as the suns Urs, Fied, and Joori, and Sukost was split into the night sky as the moons Qikost and Suban. So the legend goes. To this day, there are still many arguments and competitions to see which style is best over the other. It is said that when two masters of both Ways combat each other, neither will be able to harm the other.

Irony.

His thoughts were interrupted when he noticed a woman approach the training grounds. It was Weli. Her hands were holding each other tightly. Something troubled her.

Lady 'Vadam noticed her the moment she walked through the archway and onto the dusty grounds. Weli walked through the aisles and approached cautiously. "Good morning, m'lady," she said with a shy smile.

"What is it, Weli?" Kalika stared her in the eyes, but Weli would not

return her piercing gaze. The younglings froze, awaiting the Lady's command.

"I was hoping to speak with youâ€|" she looked at the children out of the corner of her eyes, "â€|in private."

Kalika looked away and called, "Lakei!"

"M'lady?"

"Continue the count."

"Yes m'lady!"

Kalika nodded toward Weli and both made their way from the dusty grounds, through the archway, and into soft green grass beyond the wall. Lakei took a deep breath and began to call out numbers.

The Lady looked as though she were ready to scold her the way she held her staff behind her back and how she looked down at her from her intimidating height. Weli took a deep breath and looked down at her hands. "Lady 'Vadamâ€| I know I have asked beforeâ€| but-"

Kalika's lip curled, "My answer is still no."

Weli's body began to shake, "Yes, I know, butâ€| allow me to explain-"

"There is nothing you can say to convince me otherwise."

"Please! Just listen!"

"No."

She began to make her way toward the archway. Weli had no idea what made her do it, but she stood in front of her, "My Lady, your children love me and I love them!"

Kalika's voice lowered dangerously and her eyes narrowed into slits as a cat does spotting a mouse, "Get out of my way, Weli."

"Please! I would do all of the work necessary as a wife of the Kaidon! I would not hold you back! I could take so much off of your shoulders and his-"

Kalika grabbed her shoulder and shoved her aside. Again, Weli ran in front of her with her palms open toward her before her chest, "Listen to me! It is against tradition to have only one wife for so long! Your children will know who their father is soon, if they do not already, and you of all Sangheili know that that is unacceptable! Let me bear your burden and-"

"Silence yourself!" Kalika's fangs flashed.

"Why?" Weli was yelling now. "Why will you not listen to reason? Must you hoard all of the glory and honor of being the wife of the Arbiter?"

Kalika's hand wrapped all the way around Weli's throat in an instant.

Weli's eyes widened and bulged as Kalika's voice lowered even further to resonate with the growl lifting from her chest, "Firstly, I was the only wife of Thel 'Vadam for 48 cycles before he ever became the Arbiter " 6 cycles before he ever became Shipmaster " 3 cycles before he ever became Kaidon. You are not permitted to call me a 'hoarder of glory.' Secondly, while you may sweeten the other elders' beds, beneath all of those smiles and laughs is nothing but fakery, lies, and insecurity. You are a coward and a terrible example of weakness to my children. You are not deserving of the title. My answer, for the final time, is no."

Weli's eyes were tinted a purple color by the time Kalika released her to the grass. Weli gasped for breath and fell to her knees, grabbing at her throbbing, burning throat. Kalika swept her staff behind herself, "Never ask me or disrespect me again."

As Kalika began to make her way toward the archway, Weli's voice rasped after her, "I saw you with the knife that night."

There was a tinge of satisfaction in catching the Lady of 'Vadam keep off guard. She froze in place, her head lifted ever more slightly. Weli lifted herself gently onto one knee, "I know that you were a Priestess before you ever met Lord 'Vadam" and you serve the Servants of-

Kalika's foot smashed into Weli's cheekbone. She cried out as she collapsed to the ground. She kicked her in her ribs and sat on top of her with her staff to Weli's throat. Weli couldn't breathe. She clawed at Kalika's staff, but the Lady smashed harder, her eyes wide with rage, "If you speak of this to anyone, I will personally claw your eyes out and feed them to the Pheru. If I hear so much of a whisper that you were involved in ruining our plans, I will hunt you down and cut out your uterus. Do you understand me?"

Weli was so afraid. Kalika was going to kill her. She tried to nod. Anything to stay alive.

Kalika released her and stood up silently. Weli stared up at the sky and began to cry as Kalika disappeared into the training grounds.

* * *

><p>Netu woke up gently from her long sleep. She had had a wonderful dream about climbing on a ladder and painting the sky rainbow with a paintbrush. Then the rainbow colors began to darken and turn blue, so she threw some stardust into the sky and made the night sky shimmer like diamonds.<p>

She rolled over on her white bedding. There were some perks to having your ankles dislocated. She wouldn't have to worry about chores or training for a while. She could use the break. She sighed and stretched her arms. The throbbing in her legs were still prominent and painful, but when she didn't focus on it, it was only something at the back of her mind. She looked out the big window beside her. She could look out into the gardens from here. Long tiled paths wound their way through short green and purple trees, bushes filled with blue blossoms, and elegant lamp posts that carried candles. The suns were rising in the mountains to the left of the gorgeous scene. A tiny creek with a bridge over it accompanied the path and turned gold in the new day's light. Netu sighed with delight at the peace and

calm of the morning.

Someone was walking in the garden. That was strange. Guards hardly patrolled and always kept to certain postsâ€| right? Her sisters and brothers were in no doubt training and she was certain the elders were having a meetingâ€| maybe somebody ran away? Netu crawled on her elbows toward the window, leaning forward, curious. She hadn't seen armor like that beforeâ€| then the figure crouched down into a bush. It was too suspicious for comfort.

"Guard!" She called. "Guard, guard! Help!"

The guard at her door opened it immediately and stepped in, "What is it, little one?"

"Tu'ro, there is someone strange outside. I think it is a spy."

The guard's golden armor and purple tabard rustled as he approached the window, his gilded spear withdrawn. His bright eyes scanned the gardens. "I see nothing. Are you certain it was someone unfamiliar?"

"Yes, I am certain. They had on strange white and black armor. I am sure."

Tu'ro nodded. "I will go down and investigate myself. Stay here and remain calm. I will return."

"Thank you, Tu'ro."

He nodded and left the room. Netu watched the gardens from afar as his footsteps faded away down the stairs.

* * *

><p>What a day! Valina had worked hard today! She could feel the muscles growing in her body already! Sure, she was hurting and bruised, but she knew it would be worth it!<p>

She skipped along at the back of the line of children to return to the keep. They were on their way to clean up for breakfast. They would continue training an hour later from now. She suddenly became intrigued by a white flower in a bush nearby the door to the keep. She had never seen a white flower here beforeâ€|

She stayed back a little and waited for her siblings to enter the keep. Nobody seemed to notice her staying behindâ€| so she came back down the steps to the keep, into the garden, and looked into the bush. "What awe you dowing hewe, fwower?" she asked sweetly and reached toward the strangely colored blossom.

Nobody noticed the hands that grabbed her and yanked her quietly into the bush.

* * *

><p>Thel was at his desk when Kalika entered unnoticed. When he looked up from his papers, he blinked at her curiously. He looked back down at his work and said, "Good morning, Kalika."<p>

"Good morning."

Something was wrong, "â€|Is everything alright?"

"Yes, everything is fine."

He looked up again and squinted slightly at her, "What is it you need, then?"

"Nothing," she replied quietly, dragging her fingers along the arm of a chair on the other end of the room.

"â€|You are acting strangely."

* * *

><p>Tu'ro's nostrils flared with the scent of an imposter. Netu was right. Something was wrong. He called for the other guards just as six Sangheili in white and black armor rose up from the gardens and charged him.<p>

By the Gods.

* * *

><p>His thoughts were interrupted when he heard his name being called from outside. "Arbiter! My Lord! Come quick!"<p>

Thel stood quickly and shifted his cloak behind himself as he made his way toward the window beside him. Looking out, there were the barracks and fields, and looking down, there was a guard frantically waving at him. "What is it?" he called.

"The keep is surrounded and under attack!"

Thel stared in bewilderment for a moment and in the next instant, he had composed himself and nodded, "I will gear up quickly. What kind of an attack?"

"They're everywhere, my Lord! Sangheili in white and black armor! Servants of Abiding Truth! They are here!"

"Gather the men at the barracks! Escort all the women and children you can! The elders and I will meet you there shortly!"

"Yes my Lord!"

Thel turned away as his mind began to race. However, he wasn't given the time to begin to think of a strategy for he found himself face to face with the point of a plasma pistol. He reached for his sword and weapon at his hips, but they were gone. Looking up, he saw them in the hands of someone else. His brain had a hard time focusing on the face behind the lethal weapon because it was too hard to believe.

"â€|Kalika? Whatâ€|?"

"Sit down, Arbiter," she said icily, motioning his pistol toward the chair.

His eyes were wide with disbelief and his jaws were parted, "I do notâ€¦ understand?"

"Sit," she commanded.

"â€¦Kalika, if this is some kind of sick joke, Iâ€¦"

"I assure you, this is no prank. I am in the right frame of mind. Sit down." The gun began to hum in her hand. "Now."

He slowly began to make his way back toward his desk. Just then, a formation of six men in white and black armor came through the two doors on either end of the room. Another swung in from the window beside them. This Sangheili was dressed differently from the rest. He had on a cloak and a mask representing a skull that only revealed his amber eyes. He slowly began to clap his gloved hands together chuckling, "Well done, Lady 'Vadam. Well done."

Thel was still sitting in silent shock in his chair, unable to breathe, unable to think. He stared in awe at his wife.

A sly smile crept on Kalika's face as she backed up slowly, "You look so surprised, love."

Thel remained silent and frozen in place.

The masked Sangheili laughed with glee, "This is absolutely beautiful!" He wrapped his arm around her waist and shook his head, "Beautiful work."

When he touched her, Thel's pupils narrowed into slits. His voice took on a tired and distant tone, "Who are you?"

"I?" He asked, walking away. "I suppose it doesn't matter nowâ€¦ you are about to die anyway." He took his mask off and revealed a handsome face for a Sangheili, "I am Dural Rufam, Apprentice of Avu Med 'Telcam." He bowed and lifted himself up again with a charming smile, "I am the Sangheili who will have the honor of being your assassin."

There was gun fire going on outside.

Thel locked eyes with a familiar face behind Dural. "Elder Taruk? You as well?"

The face of the Elder hardened, "Your actions are a disgrace to our gods, Arbiter. If you will not listen, I will stand against anyone who would dare question the reality and generosity of the Forerunners."

This was a dream. Kalika's face was blurred in his eyes because he refused to believe it. Their eyes locked. Thel's voice broke slightly, "After everything we have been through together?"

Dural laughed again, "Oh, this is fantastic!"

Kalika had no emotion to show. None.

"The day the Servants of Abiding Truth used the traitorous Arbiter's greatest strength against him!" Dural shook his head. "This is

wonderful. Alright, enough treasuring the moment. Let us get on with it."

Dural withdrew his sword and pointed it at Thel's heart. He reared back.

Then he stopped. "Actually? You know what would be even better?" Dural asked rhetorically. He turned toward Kalika, "Lady 'Vadam, you lovely creature. You have done the most work out of all of us. You should further prove your worth and take the honor yourself!"

Kalika stared coldly at him for a moment, then at Thel, whose eyes expressed nothing but pain and hurt. She rolled her eyes and shrugged her shoulders carelessly. She withdrew Thel's own sword, Prophet's Bane, its golden plasma glowing and spatting ferociously as if it were angered by the proposal of the idea of slaying its master.

She walked around the end of the desk and rose the blade toward Thel's chest. His eyes softened as he spoke softly, "I love you."

Still. There was no emotion. There was a blankness in her eyes.

"Awâ€| how sweet." Dural mocked.

Then somehow, along the way, things took a turn for the worst. A silence came across the room like a heavy fog. Dural looked around at the men gaping at him and demanded, "What is it?" Then he looked down at the golden sword that was embedded in his chest.

"â€|Oh."

Kalika was on top of him, her foot on his shoulder, yanking the sword she had thrown out of his chest and aiming her pistol at the head of the closest Sangheili. Thel grabbed his desk and with a bellowing roar, thrust his desk at the two Sangheili on the opposite end of the room, revealing Skira and Anari at his feet. He armed himself with two blades and launched himself ferociously at the Elites still on their feet.

Gun shots went off. Thel swept the beautiful swords around in arcs that cut up the enemy. Kalika, on the other end, thrust the heavy sword into the throat of one opponent, her stance low, feet forming a perfect L, wrists level, shoulders back, chest perpendicular to the opponent's position, and always maintaining eye contact. When the sword proved too slow for her own liking, she aimed the pistol and blasted hot green burns through shields and then through skin.

In the middle of the room, Thel and Kalika met. They each threw their weapons skillfully at the other. Skira and Anari spun in a circle and were caught in Kalika's familiar grip as Prophet's Bane and the pistol were snatched out of the air and skillfully flourished by its master. More Sangheili in white and black armor poured into the room.

The Arbiter spread his mandibles full of teeth and let forth a battle cry, "FOR 'VADAM!"

Together, the two skillful sword masters tore through the lines. Both

were merciless, both clashing sword upon armor, flashing teeth, and filling the air with their ferocious roars. Where traitors and rebels stood against them, bodies rolled to the floor with blank expressions and bloodied faces.

"FALL BACK!" was the cry that echoed down the thin hallway.

Thel knew that voice. "SHOW YOURSELF, AVU MED 'TELCAM!" He challenged. "FACE ME LIKE THE COWARD YOU ARE!"

Kalika was already on her way down the hall. She stabbed and slashed as she passed by, searching for the source of his voice as leader of the Servants of Abiding Truth responded, "WE WILL MEET ON MORE EQUAL TERMS NEXT TIME, ARBITER!"

"Keep talking, Thel!" Kalika hissed, dodging back and forth, listening as the sound of Avu's voice became stronger.

Thel kept his distance, "KEEP TO THE SHADOWS, THEN! HIDE AND THROW AWAY ANY HONOR YOU HOLD TO YOUR NAME!"

"DO NOT SPEAK TO ME OF HONOR, TRAITOROUS ARBITER!"

Found you.

She ran behind two of the Sangheili falling back and used them as her cover. When she was close enough, her swords bit into the sides of either of the Servants and jumped up on top of their backs. She drew her swords close to herself as she leapt into the air, spiraling toward a Sangheili that looked just the same as the rest except for a finely decorated helmet, mask, and cloak.

"I WILL LIVE TO SERVE ANOTHER-!"

However, someone had beaten her to it.

She landed with bent knees in front of Avu. Around her was a semi-circle of human marines with their assault rifles aimed toward Avu's head. The leader took steps back but found himself with his back to a wall as Kalika steadily rose and pointed Skira at his throat. The Arbiter approached and bowed his head in respect to a marine on the opposite end of the semi-circle. He stood beside Kalika with his sword drawn and in a booming voice said, "Avu Med 'Telcam, you are surrounded and your forces defeated. Surrender or let us have a duel to the death by next morning light so that you may die with honor."

Avu's clawed gloves curled into fists and his eyes searched, calculating the odds and possibility of, perhaps, escape. His gaze met Kalika's.

A loud, harping laugh arose from his throat. The Lady maintained a cool and expressionless gaze as Avu placed his hand over his stomach as it ached with his laugh, "You are the most persistent and diligent Sangheili I have ever met, Lady 'Vadam. That was impressive."

"Thank you."

"It is no wonder the Arbiter cowers behind you and these humans."

"You of all people should know not to mistake friendship with weakness, Field Master." Kalika sneered. Avu quieted himself immediately at the use of his former title and a scornful expression took upon his face. She smiled a sly smile, "Certainly now, you would wish you had mine."

"Conniving bitch!" He growled.

"Oh, come now Field Master. That was not very holy of you."

Thel curled his lips and bore his large fangs, "Enough. Let us end this civil war that has plagued our continent. What will it be, 'Telcam? Surrender or honor in death?"

The humans shot glances of confusion at each other. Most didn't understand that in the culture of the Sangheili, surrender was essentially a worse form of death. It entitled dishonor upon their family name.

A taut silence overtook the hall. This decision would be forever inked into the history of Sanghelios. Everyone saved their breathing as though they would suffocate if they did not. Avu's eyes scanned the scene over and over. There were the guards of the keep with their spears at the throats of his Servants. He was surrounded. Reinforcements would take too long to get here. He had left his communications device behind to avoid being tracked. None of this would have happened if he hadn't trusted her—this was all her fault. She, who he had thought had been cleansed and holy from birth, was the most treacherous and tainted of them all. His eyes seared into hers as he spoke with an edge, "I will duel in hand-to-hand combat with you by Urs' first morning light, Arbiter. The victor imprisons the families and warriors of the other's keep and maintains rule over Yermo."

Thel 'Vadam nodded, "It is agreed then. Let this war be over by tomorrow." He motioned his head toward Avu, "Guards, blindfold him and take him to the dungeons. Treat him with respect."

Six guards approached 'Telcam, one taking two glowing rings from his thigh and handcuffing the leader of the Servants. He was blindfolded with a purple sash and was led on by a chain with his throat surrounded by five pointed spears. "Arbiter!" He called.

Thel turned toward him, "Yes?"

"Spare my men."

The Arbiter did not reply as he was dragged down the hall. He then turned toward the nearest marine, "Did Admiral Hood send you?"

"Yes sir."

"How did you know to come?"

"We have radars, you know. You should get some. Might make your lives easier."

The Arbiter chuckled, "Indeed. Thank you."

"You're welcome. We're under orders to help you get this mess sorted out."

"Of course. Go to our second in command, Lei'ra 'Vadam in the barracks. You could help her get all of these Servants in the dungeons."

"Sir, with all due respect, I wouldn't recommend keeping these guys in the same area with their leader."

Thel smiled knowingly, "I can assure you, misterâ€|?"

"Roberts, sir. Lieutenant Kenneth Roberts."

"Lieutenant Roberts, there are seventeen different locations of dungeons underground 'Vadam keep. The keep is built for a situation like this. They will be well spread out."

"Sounds good, Mister Arbiter sir. Let's go, marines."

As the humans filtered out of the hall, Thel then addressed his guards, "Find any hiding Servants. Ensure the children and females are safe. Once we have everyone accounted for, we will begin clean up."

"Yes, Arbiter."

Thel began to make his way toward his office where he would get papers that accounted for everyone at 'Vadam keep. It was a long list that included every soldier, guard, elder, woman, and child. He hoped it didn't become too much shorter. Kalika followed him and interrupted his thoughts.

"That was very good acting," she said.

He chuckled, "You had to do it far longer than I had to."

"This is true. Still, I was impressed at your hurt and surprised expressions. I could really believe that you were struggling to believe I would betray you."

"We have the old theaters and plays to thank for that."

She rolled her eyes, "You did not participate in many of them."

"Yes, but I watched you enough to get the idea," he said with a knowing smile. He looked at her, hoping maybe for a blush or smile, but she just shook her head.

He stopped when they entered the office. There on the ground lay one of his once trusted and well respected elders. He knelt down and observed the face of Elder Taruk. "My expression of shock from seeing him in that armor was honest. While I knew we would reveal any and all traitors in doing this, I still feel regret."

Kalika continued toward his desk, "Do not waste your time on dwelling. He knew full and well what he was doing. He rests now with his gods." She pulled open drawers, knowing exactly what Thel was coming for and pulled out the lists. She approached Thel and grabbed

his arm. "Come now. You have a duel to ready yourself for."

* * *

><p>Author's Notes

*) I know, I know. "HOW DARE YOU TAKE DOWN ONE OF THE BIGGEST CHARACTERS IN THE THURSDAY WAR SERIES HAIWDHAODHAOIWFGKNSDLKHFIFGQ" I know, I am a disgrace to Fanfiction kind. BUT, it's okay though. I have a plan. Trust me. Trust meeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee.

*) Soâ€¦ turns out Halo 5 came along and kinda screwed up what I had in mind for the rest of this series. I'm trying to decide if I should ignore the new Halo 5 canon and go my own way or completely rewrite CoTH. I dunno. Send me messages and reviews. What do you guys think? Should I wait for Halo 6? (OH MY GOD CORTANA WHAT ARE YOU DOING D':)

*) This chapter was the most fun I had writing out of all of them so far. Thanks as always for reading! Much love!

~Z

End
file.